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**TOUCH, TASTE & DEVOUR**  
**-Phenomenology of film and the film experiencer in the *cinema of sensations*-**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the possibilities of reconciling corporeal and visceral film experience with theory. It provides an analyses of two contemporary films; Marina de Van's *Dans Ma Peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002, France) and Claire Denis's *Vendredi Soir* (*Friday Night*, 2002, France). The thesis uses the theoretical framework of film phenomenology and the articulations of 'cinema of sensations' in an attempt to apprehend why these two films in particular arguably affect their experiencer in a way other films do not. A broader aim of this thesis is to continue the discussion on the possibilities of reconciling theory with affective spectatorship, and to explore the body's response to a film experience, as a valid part of analysis.

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## INTRODUCTION

I started this research journey with an interest in exploring female desire, spectatorship and theories of feminist representation. From early on my research was fuelled by my own strongly visceral and corporeal responses to certain contemporary films. I was fascinated by how these films moved my body the way no other films did. The film theories I read, however, came short in helping me articulate the viscosity of my response.

This thesis is an attempt to reconcile my (bodily) response with theory by using a particular body of academic writing to understand why these two films in particular; *Dans Ma Peau* (*In My Skin*, de Van, 2002, France) and *Vendredi Soir* (*Friday Night*, Denis, 2002, France) move my (the) body in a way that other films do not. The thesis aims to unfold the ways in which these films stirred and affected me. I aim to find a way, not only to talk about the cinematic tools used to 'jerk my emotions', but to find out whether some articulations in recent film phenomenology could be used to help me apprehend the ways in which these films 'move' the deeper levels of my being. This thesis is an attempt to reconcile theory with affective spectatorship, to find a way to discuss my body's, and hence hopefully *the* body's, responses as a valid part of analysis.

In chapter 1 I briefly discuss some recent theoretical works on film phenomenology which have been useful in attempting to make sense of my corporeal responses to the discussed films. I have chosen this approach as it explores film *via* the lived body and studies film's affect *on* the lived body that experiences it. Concentrating on the work of film phenomenologists allowed me to consider the affective qualities of spectatorship in this compact thesis. In Chapter 2 I explore the concept of 'cinema of sensations' through the works of Martine Beugnet and Tim Palmer, and place the two films analysed in this thesis, in a wider context of similar films. Discussing the similarities amongst a wider group of films, allows me to suggest the possibilities of filmmaking as an art for all senses and hence contemplate my chosen films as part of a wider phenomenon. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the analyses of the two films that 'get under my skin' in very different ways; *Dans Ma Peau* (*In My Skin*, de Van, 2002) and *Vendredi Soir* (*Friday Night*, Denis,

2002). First I introduce the films and their makers and then discuss the cinematic tools used to privilege affective response in these two films. I use the previously discussed theories in articulating my visceral responses to them through an exploration of some of the key moments of the films. In the conclusion I discuss the problems of translating embodied knowledge into language and offer suggestions on how this research could be taken further.

## 1 FILM PHENOMENOLOGY & FILM EXPERIENCE

In search of a strand of film theory that would take into account the film experiencer's body, corporeal being and visceral responses, I turn to film phenomenology. I have chosen to concentrate on this rather recent development in film theory as I find its approach to be the most suitable for the analysis of the two films I am interested in looking at. Typically, for example, explorations of female directors' work might include lengthy discussions on feminist film theory and especially feminist approaches to spectatorship, discussions which I will not be participating in here.<sup>1</sup> My approach follows the lead of film phenomenology in an attempt to analyse my chosen films and the ways in which they privilege affective spectatorship by providing their experiencer with a visceral, corporeal and multisensuous art experience. As I argue, that the two films analysed in this thesis have been made to be experienced, not merely watched, it was important for me to find a strand of theory that would allow me to include the body, my body, and the way it responds to the experienced films. I found that most other strands of film theory, like those that base their articulations on psychoanalysis or feminism, privilege the audiovisual dimensions of the film, and concentrate on the psychological affects of the film. I found, however, that these films move my body; my muscles tensed, relaxed, my skin remembered evoked sensations, my viscera recoiled and mouth tasted. These films are made to be experienced with all of our senses, and hence the phenomenological approach is, for me, the approach that might do most justice to them.

### 1.1 Fleshing out the film experience

There is a clear division between academic and journalistic ways of current writing about film, and in many aspects so there should be. But it has been argued by some film theorists (Vivian Sobchack, Steven Shaviro, Martine Beugnet, Laura U. Marks and Jennifer M. Barker to mention a few), that film theory might be disadvantaged by this strict separation. As Vivian Sobchack declares:

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<sup>1</sup> For those interested in Feminist Film theory, criticism and spectatorship one could suggest for example the following: Kaplan, E. A., ed. (2000) *Feminism & Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Doane, M. A. and Mellencamp, P., eds. (1984) *Re-Vision: essays in feminist film criticism*, Los Angeles: The American Film Institute; Williams, L., ed., (1994) *Viewing Positions - Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press; De Lauretis, T., (1984) *Alice Doesn't - Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and Mayne J., (1993) *Cinema and Spectatorship*. London and New York: Routledge.



Nearly every time I read a movie review in a newspaper or popular magazine, I am struck by the gap that exists between our actual *experience* of the cinema and the *theory* that we academic film scholars construct to explain it - or perhaps, more aptly, to explain it away (2004: 52, italics in the original).

This gap between theory and experience, the attempt to avoid being overtly subjective, keeping one's distance from the object of analysis, has been a long and treasured tradition in film theory. Since the late 1960s/early 1970s film theorists have emphasised the importance of keeping one's distance from the object of analysis in order to remain objective and thus capable of analysis, perhaps in fear of appearing naïve, one's writing becoming too 'touchy-feely', too journalistic, or even too feminine. Ocularcentrism - seeing vision as the primary means through which we experience film - and psychoanalysis have been embraced as primary ways of analysing films. One could argue, however, that at times this cautiousness and limitation to primarily one sense (vision) has prevented film theorists from writing about the full experience of film. What I discuss in this thesis is the possibility of a more 'fleshed-out' experience of a film. In order to keep in mind what a corporeal and visceral art form film is/can be, I will follow Craig Sinclair's example and use the term 'experiencer' in place of the more conventional 'spectator'/'viewer'. Sinclair writes:

I have coined the term 'experiencer,' an awkward yet suitable multisensory and yet sense-neutral expression to describe someone who 'partakes of films'. ... I hope by using this term to overcome the prevalent and persistent logic that has already hegemonically inscribed the idea that film experiencing is primarily a visual endeavour (Sinclair 2003: 17-18).

Sinclair does not want to use a substitute like 'cinemagoer' as cinema is not the only place where one might 'experience' a film.<sup>2</sup> 'Perceiver', although suggesting multisensory involvement, refers to 'perceiving' which is secondary compared to 'experience' e.g. I experience raindrops on my face and after that perceive that it is, in fact, raining. Sinclair goes on to explain that although experiencer can be thought of as a more involved participant than a visually focused viewer, she might not be so actively involved

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<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted here that most of the theorists discussed in this chapter explore films as an individual experience rather than 'cinema', a social experience of going to the movie theatre to watch amongst others. Through my own experiences, as well as through observations and arguments by theatre practitioners Howard Barker and Antonin Artaud, I will expand the discussion to include experiencing film in a communal space of cinema, when ever appropriate i.e. when I personally have had that experience of the film in question.

as to be called a perceiver. Perceiving suggests a level of understanding which might not always be the case in film experience. Although a level of intellectual engagement is certainly encouraged, it is entirely possible to experience a film without, for example, perceiving (all of) the subtle details the director has wanted to get across. This is partly the challenge of film analysis. The analysis is always subjective and it is always multisensory. I, for example, have a preferred way of perceiving the world around me. This preference affects my choices of film amongst other things. I am a very tactile person. My favourite organ of the human body is skin. When I watch a dance performance my body remembers what it feels like to move in a similar way. This is due to years of dance training. I watch films with and through my body, and I am perhaps more prone to feeling the touch I see on screen because of tactility's importance as a way to perceive the world around me.

Being subjective always has been acceptable in film journalism, and it is in film reviews that we can read the experiencer's sensual responses of almost being able to feel the silk of a dress, or smelling the dinner being served. However, during the past decade film theorists have re-acknowledged that a lot is to be gained by taking all senses into account in the film experience, and embracing the subjectivity of the experience of a film. This can lead to richer, much more sensuous analysis of a film as an art form for all senses. Sobchack notes that Eisenstein spent the latter part of his career investigating the 'synchronisation of the senses' and continually reminded us that although cinema is intellectual, it has sensory thought and emotional intelligence and is quite worthless without it (2004: 54-5). Both films discussed in this thesis certainly pose intellectual challenges and perhaps provide intellectual pleasure to the experiencers, however, these intellectual pleasures can be highly enhanced by the sensory feast that they also provide.

Recent developments in film theory have taken into account both the cinema's sensual address, and the viewer's 'corporeal-material' being: Steven Shavero (1993) explores the visceral event of film viewing with a Deleuzian emphasis; Laura Marks (2000, 2002) uses her formulations of 'haptic visuality' to talk about 'haptic and erotic', 'skin of the film' and 'touch' in relation to and in-between the image and the body; Vivian Sobchack (2004) explores corporeality as a sense-making subject drawing from phenomenological

and feminist philosophy and Jennifer M. Barker (2008) develops further a theory of film as a tactile and sensuous experience which goes beneath its experiencer's skin and reverberates in her body. Sobchack reminds us of how all our senses are present, and depending on each other, when making sense of the film experience:

Even at the movies our vision and hearing are informed and given meaning by our other modes of sensory access to the world: our capacity not only to see and to hear but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our own weight, dimension, gravity, and movement in the world. In sum, the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*. Which is to say that movies provoke in us the 'carnal thoughts' that ground and inform more conscious analysis (Sobchack 2004: 60, italics in the original).

It is this making-sense of the film/world with and *because* of our bodies that prompted film theorists to turn towards existential philosophy and especially philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's explorations on phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1998) centers his philosophy around the body. He talks about our bodies being the means by which we are inserted into world, by which we relate to the world and make sense of it. He argues that in order to comprehend the body, we have to conceive of the body and the mind as mutually dependent aspects of the human subject. The body mediates between the interior world of our consciousness and the exterior world of 'other' objects.<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that the experience through the body always precedes the act of conscious reflection:

When I begin to reflect my reflection bears upon an unreflective experience; moreover my reflection cannot be unaware of itself as an event, and so it appears to itself in the light of a truly creative act, of a changed structure of consciousness, and yet it has to recognize, as having priority over its own operations, the world which is given to the subject, because the subject is given to himself. The real has to be described, not constructed or formed (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: x).

The body is both meaningful and meaning-giving even when we are not deliberately directing it to behave a certain way. As Jennifer M. Barker poignantly says, phenomenology can be used: 'as a means of seeing more clearly what the body already feels' (2004: 3). Sobchack, on the other hand, reminds us that it is received knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> This meditative quality of the body is disturbingly present in testimonies of people who cut their own skin in order to either release something from within, or to invite 'the world'/others in. The representations of the boundaries of the body are discussed in more detail through the analysis of Marina de Van's *Dans Ma Peau/In My Skin* (2002, France).

that tells us film is a medium for primarily our visual and aural senses, and from this it naturally follows that its appeal to any other of our senses is understood as figural rather than literal. This habituated knowledge can be argued to be reductive as it rarely accurately describes our actual sensory experience of a film. As Sobchack explains:

When we watch a film, all our senses are mobilized, and often, depending on the particular solicitation of a given film or filmic moment, our naturalized sensory hierarchy and habitual sensual economy are altered and rearranged. In that experience the literal and figural reciprocate and reverse themselves as 'sense' - primary and secondary contexts confused, hierarchy and thus the grounds of metaphor undermined if not completely undone (2004: 80).

One thing that phenomenological practice aims to do, is to validate the immediate experience. As Barker says: 'what we "know" isn't always a matter of thinking, but of feeling' (2004:3). Preconceived notions, theories and discourses only become relevant once we have had time for reflection. Phenomenology grants our feelings and our experience credibility in a way that differs from most theoretical approaches. Sobchack makes good use of all her senses in her essay 'What My Fingers Knew' in which she grounds her analysis of Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993, New Zealand) in her own flesh.<sup>4</sup> She talks about *The Piano* as an example of a film that moved her deeply and stirred her feelings; sensitized her skin, constricted her chest, 'filled her up' with almost 'suffocating' feelings. Sobchack writes: 'Throughout the film my whole being was intensely concentrated and, rapt as I was in the world onscreen, I was wrapped also in a body that was achingly aware of itself as a sensuous, sensitized, sensible material capacity' (2004: 61-2).

Reading her analysis of the film vividly reminded me of my own experience of seeing it in a fully-packed cinema in Finland. The weather outside was approaching minus thirty degrees Celsius, the audience huddled together in the auditorium formed what felt like one living, breathing being whilst waiting for the cinema to warm up. I remember later thinking that the closeness of people, and the shared experience of the coldness outside that we had now together found shelter from, strongly influenced my viewing experience. It made me a part of the audience contrary to my usual desire to try to isolate myself from the crowd in an attempt to enhance my own private experience and

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<sup>4</sup> Part of Sobchack's essay collection *Carnal Thoughts - Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkley, Los Angeles, London: Routledge. 2004

enjoyment of the film. I was also more patient with the audience's eating, breathing and talking habits. Once the film started the talking and the sounds of eating quietened as we all were drawn into the film. Although my own body responded most strongly to the scene where the skin and flesh of Ada's leg is touched through the hole in her stocking, by feeling both the touching as well as being touched, I surprised myself by feeling shocked through someone else's experience. In the scene where Ada's finger is brutally chopped off, and at the exact moment of the axe coming down, a girl in a row behind us screamed out loud and continued to cry and whimper uncontrollably, hysterically even, throughout the following scene. I have never forgotten how surprised I was of such an extreme reaction to a 'mere film'. Her body was shaking, her body was in shock as she was trying to distance herself from the body on screen. I turned to look at her. I felt sorry for her. I was scared for her. I was slightly embarrassed by her. But I was happy to see, as the film ended, that she had stayed, watched the whole of the film. She responded to people's curious looks with a shy, slightly embarrassed smile. I did not ask her about her reaction. But I still remember it, fifteen years after it happened, and I am pretty sure, so does she. Although this experience was more a cinematic experience, only possible in a dark room full of strangers, its corporeal memory was vividly awakened by the films discussed in this thesis. The experience of my fellow cinema-goer, also alerted all of my senses to be present in the experience we were sharing; if she could feel the representation of a chopping off the finger so deeply in her body, I was alerted to the fact that I might be missing something if I was not as alert to the rest of the film. This particular cinematic experience also prompted me to recognise it as a 'common sensuous experience' as Sobchack here argues:

Thus I would argue that my experience of *The Piano* was a heightened instance of our common sensuous experience at the movies: the way we are in some carnal modality able to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images; to feel a visual atmosphere envelop us; to experience weight, suffocation, and the need for air; to take a flight in kinetic exhilaration and freedom even as we are relatively bound to our theater seats; to be knocked backward by a sound; to sometimes even smell and taste the world we see on the screen (Sobchack 2004: 64-5).

What interests me in the previous quote is how Sobchack draws attention to the fact that when we are experiencing a film, we do not consciously think of our sight translating into smell or taste; rather we experience it without a thought. This is also

Merleau-Ponty's argument about the experience proceeding perception; we experience a jolt and only after the experience perceive what caused it.

Most of us living in a Western society have been taught that strong outbursts of any kind are better kept to oneself in public places and during public occasions. Keeping in mind how we, individual film experiencers, might respond to an extreme reaction like the above described screaming, it is easier to appreciate some film theorists' reluctance to analyse their film experience and stick with the ocularcentric viewing experience. As Sobchack remarks:

....most film theorists still seem either embarrassed or bemused by bodies that often act wantonly and crudely at the movies, involuntarily countering the fine-grained sensibilities, intellectual discriminations, and vocabulary of critical reflection (Sobchack 2004: 56-7).

One can see why film theorists would want to keep analysis as an intellectual exercise. Bringing each theorist's individual body, sensual experience and subjective interpretation into the equation, could lead to a (momentary) collapse of order in the 'objective' world of film academia; it might become so relentlessly personal it would offer little of more general application. But we all, including film theorists, enter cinemas 'in our bodies'. We could not leave our other senses outside the experience even if we wanted to. So why do we think that those other senses are not involved in making sense of what we see and hear? It is perhaps our fear and even resentment of possibly being manipulated by the texts we are faced with; 'tear jerkers' that make us cry even when presenting us with dull clichés we can predict a mile away, or horror conventions that make us jolt even though we have seen the film (many times) before. But it is, of course, exactly that jolt that is a 'give away' that our body, and all of its senses, are involved in making sense of the experience.

### Bodies & Genres

Linda Williams and Carol Clover have described these films - 'tear jerkers' and 'fear-jerkers' - as part of 'body genres'. Carol Clover (1994) coined the term to describe films which privilege the sensational; pornography and horror. Williams (1991) talks about melodrama, and proposes that both horror and porn could be considered under the rubric of melodrama:

In this extended sense melodrama can encompass a broad range of films marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive (Williams 1991: 3).

This expanded definition of melodrama could then be argued to include both films analysed in this thesis. I would, however, argue that they are part of European art cinema rather than horror, pornography or melodrama. They differ from classical blockbusters, or mass-produced pornography, by having unconventional narratives, minimal dialogue that has another purpose than taking the story forward and they focus extensively on cinematic aesthetics and the possibilities of cinematic expression. They can also be argued to provide intellectual as well as sensuous challenges to their experiencers, something that body genres would not make their priority. As what defines body genres is, as Williams describes:

...an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated by these texts - an impression that the very colloquialisms of 'tear jerker' and 'fear jerker' express - and to which we could add pornography's even crude sense as texts to which some people might be inclined to 'jerk off' (Williams 1991: 5, spelling as in the original).

It can, however, be a very thin and hazy line that separates what some consider art and others pornography or horror. Catherine Breillat's films are often talked about as pornographic and Clare Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001, France) referred to as horror. It is a very subjective experience as we make sense, comprehend, and feel the film with the whole of our bodies including our personal histories and preferences, even if we are academics and/or film critics. Vision may be the most privileged sense in our current, Western European media culture, but it is not isolated from our other senses. As noted before; we do not leave our other senses at the door when we enter a film theatre or turn on the DVD player in our living room. The more our senses are involved in the film experience, the more likely we are to be fully involved in the experience. This level of investment in and engagement with a film will multiply its chances of 'touching us'.

Elena del Rio talks about tactility between film and its experiencer in a more literal way: 'As the image becomes translated into a bodily response, body and image no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of

reciprocal re-alignment and inflection' (del Río 1996: 101, also cited in Sobchack 2004: 65). This idea of surfaces in contact is explored in more detail in Marks's articulations on 'haptic visuality' and 'skin of the film'. As she writes: 'I want to emphasize the tactile and contagious quality of cinema as something we viewers brush up against like another body' (2000: xii). Obviously not much is gained by getting up and brushing against the screen the film is projected on, as Sobchack clarifies:

I am not speaking metaphorically of touching and being touched at and by the movies but 'in some sense' quite literally of our capacity to feel the world we see and hear onscreen and of the cinema's capacity to 'touch' and 'move' us offscreen... .. Experiencing a movie, not even merely 'seeing' it, my lived body enacts this reversibility in perception and subverts the very notion of *onscreen* and *offscreen* as mutually exclusive site or subject positions (Sobchack 2004: 66-67).

Meaning emerges from the conjunction of the experiencers' bodies and cinematic representation. As Sobchack - who explores the cinematic apparatus within the moving image culture - argues, it does not have a discrete origin in either.

## 1.2 Cinesthetic Film Experiencer & Haptic Vision

Sobchack (2004: 67) names the subversive body in the film experience as the 'cinesthetic subject'. This term derives from 'cinema' and two scientific terms: 'synaesthesia', involuntary experience in which stimulating one sense causes a perception in another, and 'coenaesthesia', which refers to the potential and perception of one's whole sensorial being, and is used, for example, to describe the sensual condition of a child at birth. Sobchack suggests that as it is possible for even those of us who do not have a synaesthetic perception as such to have an experience of, for example, 'tasting the recipe' as we read it, that synaesthetic perception is, in fact, the rule we are unaware of. This could be because; 'we have become so habituated to the constant cross-modal translations of our sensory experience that they are transparent to us except in the most extreme instances' (Sobchack 2004:70). So what is suggested here is that, as we all already are 'cinesthetic subjects', if we pay attention to how our other senses 'read' a film and allow ourselves to trust those senses as a basis for film analysis as much as our visual and aural senses, we will find viewing films a more sensuous and perhaps not only 'eye-opening', but 'sense-shaking' experience. As Sobchack eloquently



says:

As lived body and a film viewer, the cinesthetic subject subverts the prevalent objectification of vision that would reduce sensorial experience at the movies to an impoverished 'cinematic sight' or posit anorexic thoughts of identification that have no flesh on them, that cannot stomach a 'feast for the eyes' (2004: 71).

This discussion of cinesthetic subject, 'touch', haptics and tactility is enriched by Marks's intensely physical and sensuous engagement with media art and film. Marks talks about 'the skin of the film' which: 'suggests the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes' (Marks, 2000: xi). She derives the term, *haptic visuality*, from the nineteenth-century art historian Aloïs Riegl and his distinction between optical and haptic images, and explains:

While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality (Marks 2000: 163).

Haptic *perception* is the way we experience touch both on the surface as well as inside our bodies. It is a combination of tactile, kinesthetic and proprioceptive functions. In haptic *visuality*, eyes function like organs of touch and the term can be used to discuss the way images touch the surface as well as the insides of our bodies. Although Marks discusses films shot on video, a technique which creates a perhaps more 'material' effect in its 'graininess', the principles she identifies can be and are used in film. Haptic images pull us closer to the image, away from the narrative, inviting if not forcing us to contemplate the image itself, where as optical images depend on the distance between the viewing subject and the viewed object.

This is done beautifully in Clare Denis's *Vendredi Soir* when the lovers explore each other's skins and the image pulls us so close, it is almost impossible to identify to whom the skin explored belongs. These images 'speak' to the surface of our own bodies, our skin 'sees' them through feeling the touch of air, human hand or a blade as is the case in Marina de Van's *Dans Ma Peau*. Cutting through the skin in *Dans Ma Peau* also touches the insides of our bodies, it engages our unseen organs in the viewing experience by means of haptic visuality. Marks also claims: 'Haptic images are erotic regardless of their

content, because they construct a particular kind of intersubjective relationship between beholder and image' (Marks 2002: 13).

If pornography is obsessed with visibility and an implied will to mastery over the image by the viewer, then the erotic relationship Marks identifies in haptic cinema depends on the very opposite; limited visibility and the viewer's lack of any kind of mastery over the image. But lack of mastery by no mean equals passivity, quite the reverse. Haptic visuality has been described as *deliberate* vision. It implies an active viewing where the viewer has to constitute the image, bring it forth from obscurity, rather than use the pre-given vision dictated and directed by the filmmaker. Marks expands further by declaring:

Thus the act of viewing, seen in the terms of existential phenomenology, is one in which both I and the object of my vision constitute each other. In this mutually constitutive exchange I find the germ of an intersubjective eroticism (2002: 13).

The haptic images 'pull' the viewer/experiencer so close to the image that the object is no longer 'viewable', hence challenging objectivity and inviting a new way of engaging with the image. There is almost a suggestion of a sort of a 'mimesis' as the viewer is drawn so close to the image, she takes its shape and 'becomes it'. This haptic form of visuality questions and almost erases the boundaries of subjectivity much like in Marks's description of what is erotic in sex:

...the ability to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver. It's the ability to have your sense of self, your self-control, taken away and restored - and to do the same for the other person (2002: xvi).

It can also be regarded as representative of the lack of distance from the image that Mary Ann Doane and others have theorised about in relation to female spectatorship. This lack of distance has been argued to prevent female 'spectators' from experiencing viewing pleasure as they watch female bodies as objectified and scrutinized by the 'male gaze' on screen.<sup>5</sup> Haptic visuality also suggests a certain kind of surrendering by the viewer/experiencer, a surrender to the image which could be seen to relate to Studlar's arguments about the masochistic aesthetic and the forever postponed gratification for the experiencer. Studlar explains:

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<sup>5</sup> See Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in Kaplan, A. E. (2000) *Feminism & Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

The masochistic text relies on suggestive description and narrative suspense enacted through games of disguise and tantalizing pursuit implying gratification forever postponed to the future... In the masochistic fantasy, seduction offers the promise - and the danger - of symbiosis (Studlar 1988: 21).

This merging which Studlar calls 'symbiosis' and Marks 'intersubjective relationship between beholder and image' is, however, not possible if the experiencer is not 'taking part' in the experience. It is through her own sensuous engagement with the image that the experiencer 'makes' her own gratification. So haptic viscosity offers not only gratification and pleasure but also possibility of symbiosis, of touching and being touched by the experience.

### Surrendering to the image

As a young child I had an experience which I have later come to think of as that of 'haptic perception'. During the winters of my childhood, the sea that surrounds my home town used to freeze up during the winter months. This delighted me to no end as I loved skating but I loved skating on the frozen sea even more! Sometimes it would snow so much that the ice got covered in a thick layer of snow which prevented one skating on it, but encouraged skiing instead. So we would ski, all the way from the seashore to a small island a couple of kilometres away. We usually included my mother and I, me skiing and my mother walking behind me. This particular time it had started snowing after we left and the snowing grew heavier as we made our way towards the island. I was leading our 'expedition' feeling very independent and brave in my 7 year-old body. It was easy to play a game where I was alone in the world discovering the unknown. I skied faster and faster until I got so tired I had to stop. I raised my eyes from the tracks and saw nothing but white all around me. I could hardly see the ends of my skis. I could not see the island we were heading for and, for a moment, I couldn't see my mother.

The skiing route was marked so I was not afraid of getting lost or separated from my mother. But what frightened me was a temporary loss of vision; being blinded by the whiteness. The snow literally enveloped me in it; it was falling on me, it was under me, it surrounded me completely. I remember feeling that I could easily disappear into all that whiteness. It was not the snow that scared me but the whiteness that was

swallowing me. My mother, who is an artist, had taught me that white is not a colour but rather a tone, a variation of light and shadow. In a child's mind this was a scary quality.<sup>6</sup> White was mysterious, almost like a living thing that could swallow landscapes as well as people. But as I stopped fighting against the whiteness and stood there safe in the knowledge that my mother was just about catch up with me, I started seeing things in a different way. Shapes were starting to form from the whiteness, soft and unfocused shapes that were quite beautiful when allowed to be just what they were.

In my fear of losing my vision I felt engulfed by the landscape which I was no longer able to see with clear focus. It was an experience that my body still remembers thirty years after it happened, and had I not given in to its seduction, I would have lost a beautiful experience. I have later had a similar kind of experience through using 'soft focus' in martial arts training. Letting go of the automatic idea of vision's supremacy grounded me in my body and highlighted especially the tactility of our practice. Through our practice's improvisational nature, it also provided me with an embodied experience of 'being in the moment', an experience which I had found unattainable whilst relying predominately on my vision.

Again, this 'letting go' does not refer to passivity on the experienter's part. It refers to letting go of our own limitations of what we consider possible, sensually or otherwise. Relying on the audience to actively 'make sense' of what is presented to it, to engage with the text/performance and even challenge it, is a practise frequently used in the world of theatre. As a part of a live performance, theatre audiences have a more direct possibility of influencing the performance they are participating in. By entering the performance space they become (potentially active) parts of the performance. Typically, film audiences are not considered, and do not consider themselves, as active. Their actions in the film theatre, for example, will perhaps affect their fellow participants, but not the film itself. But if haptic cinema needs its experiencers to 'surrender' their bodies and its sensations to the image, then one could argue that what it is promising to its audience is a chance of gaining something 'more' through this 'surrender'. The audience is respected, honoured even, as sense-making active participants of the film

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<sup>6</sup> I had, of course, also been warned about the poisons that were involved in making paints, and the 'greatest' of whites is made from lead. It has poisoned several artists as well as women looking for a beauty fix. Perhaps this knowledge was also at the back of my mind...

experience, by presenting it with a challenge. By presuming its audience to be experiencers (a term that implies active part taking) instead of viewers (passive ocularcentric audience), it transpires that they want and expect to be challenged by what they will experience, and will be honoured for their efforts in it. This is what Howard Barker writes in his *Arguments for Theatre* about his 'Theatre of Catastrophe' and honouring the audience:

An honoured audience will quarrel with what it has seen, it will go home in a state of anger, not because it disapproves, but because it has been taken where it was reluctant to go. Thus morality is created in art, by exposure to pain and illegitimate thought (1993: 47).

Although the processes of identification differ greatly in the theatre and film experience, Barker could be talking about any form of art which wants to honour its experiencers. In film a challenge might be presented by not offering likeable characters to identify with or a chronologically developing story-line to follow. The theorists discussed above have suggested that rather than relating to subject positions or characters in film, identification should be thought through the sense and sensibility of materiality itself. We, as subjects experiencing the film, are subjective matter sensually relating to events, things that 'matter' on screen. When talking about her experience of *The Piano*, Sobchack reflects: '...I had a carnal interest and investment in being *both* "here" *and* "there", in being able *both* to sense *and* to be sensible, to be *both* the subject *and* the object of tactile desire' (2004: 66 italics in the original). There is what she calls the 'immediate tactile shock' which alerts her to feel not only her own body but also that of the character being touched, as well as the character who touches.

I am urging that we surrender to and revel in cinematic fascination, rather than distance ourselves from it with tools of psychoanalytic reserve and hermeneutic suspicion.... film's radical potential to subvert social hierarchies and decompose relations of power lies in its extreme capacity for seduction and violence (Shaviro, 1993: 64).

What has been proposed then, is that spectators and theorists alike 'surrender' to film in order to experience it fully, 're-learn' the ways in which we can actively experience it. Cinema is a rich art form and caters for all our senses. At its best, it pleasantly surprises us by being more than we ever could have hoped for or imagined. At times, it pushes us against and beyond the thresholds of our being, of the limits of what we find

comfortable or even excitable. It may test our tolerance, even challenge us to reconsider what we thought we knew, felt or thought about a subject, about ourselves or the world we live in. It may even suggest that we open ourselves up to the possibility of personal change which may lead to changes on a wider context. I will now move on to discuss a contemporary 'body of films' that has been argued to do exactly that.

## 2 CINEMA OF SENSATIONS and THE CORPOREAL FILM EXPERIENCER

This chapter establishes a particular corpus of films which considers cinema as an artform for all senses and emphasises the corporeality of film experience. This contemporary strain of cinema has been called ‘Cinema du Corps’ or ‘Cinema of Brutal Intimacy’ (Palmer, 2006), ‘New French Extremity/Extremism’ (Quandt, 2004), ‘New Wave of Excess’ (Downing, 2004), ‘New Cinema of Transgression’ (Grønstad, 2006) and ‘Cinema of Sensations/Senses’ (Beugnet, 2007). It has been argued to be a vigorous, conceptually dynamic new model of filmmaking, that interrogates physicality in brutally intimate terms, and hence demands a new way of viewing and a new way of theorising spectatorship. Although most of the writers refer to contemporary French cinema, and some of them see the emergence of these films as a primarily French phenomenon, I am inclined to regard these films as part of a wider international interest in corporeal cinema that includes films like *La Pianiste/The Piano Teacher* (Haneke, 2001, Germany/Poland/ France/Austria), *Rokugatsu No Hebi/A Snake of June* (Tsukamoto, 2002, Japan), *The Dreamers* (Bertolucci, 2003, France/UK/Italy), *Brown Bunny* (Gallo, 2003, USA/Japan/ France), *9 Songs* (Winterbottom, 2004, UK), *Dans Ma Peau* and *Vendredi Soir* to mention a few.

What brings these films together is not simply their use of intertwined themes of sex and violence, nor the sometimes brutal investigations of the human body, but also their use of film techniques. Their experimental approach - to lighting, movement, colour, tempo, narrative, and proximity to the object of our (directed or undirected) gaze - can be argued to separate them from (low) body genres such as pornography and horror.<sup>7</sup> Beugnet (2007) points out that these films tend to be best defined as ‘unclassifiable’; the disregard of genre boundaries is as much a feature of what she names ‘cinema of sensations’ or ‘cinema of senses’ as is the merging of figurative and abstract in the form of the films.<sup>8</sup> The term I will use to describe this ‘body’ of contemporary filmmaking is ‘cinema of sensations’ after Beugnet. My reason for opting for this term is that these films may indeed engage the experiencers’ senses, but do so in ways which use the

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware that, these films are sometimes referred to as ‘art-house porn’ for this exact reason, but as pornography is a subject well worth its own thesis, and neither of the films I have chosen to analyse fall into that category, I will not be addressing the subject of pornography in this thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Beugnet uses the term ‘cinema of sensations’ and ‘cinema of senses’ interchangeably without really defining the difference between the two.

senses to create sensations, emotions and arguably provoke intellectual engagement.

The films regarded as part of the cinema of sensations do not always offer logical storylines, and their characters may provoke more resentment than sympathy. The enjoyment, if there is any, is to be found elsewhere than through our ability to follow the logic of the storyline and/or our identification with the characters. What this requires, and which might be partly the source of resentment and frustration created by these films is, as Beugnet says:

A lesson in humility: the recognition, through a powerful sensory experience, that we have to unlearn before we can learn to see and feel again (2007: 6).

I am tempted to suggest, that through humility and in very much the same way as haptic images can give us an experience of 'seeing for the first time' as we gradually make sense of what it is we are faced with, the cinema of sensation could help us 'experience' the art of cinema in a new way. Most of the films which are talked about under the heading of cinema of sensations, deviate from the conventional customs of constructing a feature film, which is why they tend to lend themselves more easily to analysis through film phenomenology.<sup>9</sup> They encourage and reward the involvement of all senses perhaps more than so called 'mainstream' films do. This is not to say that 'mainstream films' could not be analysed with a phenomenological approach, as they could, but the focus of analysis is often on the narrative and the rewarding experience, catharsis for the audience, is gained through a resolution in that narrative, which is not necessarily the case with cinema of sensations. What cinema of sensations does is merge the pleasurable with the horrible, the disgusting with the sublime. It uses (unsimulated) sex with (sexual) violence to affect us viscerally as well as challenge us intellectually. It offers its experiencers challenges rather than resolution with its transgressive themes.

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<sup>9</sup> These films do not obey nor perhaps even believe in conventional customs of storytelling techniques which rely heavily on conventional structure of beginning, middle and end and use dialogue as a means to move the story forward. Instead they may challenge story structures by not providing their experiencer with a resolution in the end and yet taking them on a journey and challenging their ways of perceiving their surroundings. Some of these films have minimal dialogue or dialogue which is more reflectional rather than essential for the story to move forwards.



## Themes of transgression

Reoccurring themes in cinema of sensations are sex and violence, often intertwined. This combination has led some critics to accuse the films of using mere shock tactics - images and subjects previously seen in films belonging to body genres - and hence not being worthy of serious consideration as more than attention seeking by the filmmaker.<sup>10</sup> Those more willing to see beyond the shock techniques have argued that this 'movement' suggests new ways of seeing through expanding the familiar limits of aesthetics; to, for example, question our habitual ways of seeing sexuality by denaturalising the sexual spectacle (Downing, 2004).

For example, films like *Baise-Moi* (Despentes, Trinh Thi, 2000) and *Romance* (Breillat, 1999) blur the boundaries between an art film and a 'porn flick'. Furthermore, in the case of *Baise-Moi* the violence of the female characters makes its representations even more problematic. These films continue to explore the erotic as a thematic, aesthetic and formal concern amongst others, and can be argued to attempt to change the ways we look at (representations) of sexual acts on screen, through their transgressive representations of the female body and its desires.

These art films are not porn. Nor are they even art films *about* porn. Rather, they are attempts to disrupt, fragment or destroy the naturalised relationship between the voyeur and the desired spectacle in cinema. These films offer a specifically cinematic intervention into wider, ongoing critical debates about sexuality and subjectivity in postmodern ethical indifference; to reflect on the myth repertoire of heteronormative culture; and to problematise, pluralise or undermine our habitual and lazy ways of looking at sex in a culture saturated with images of it (Downing 2004: 279).

As Downing points out, this attempt 'to destroy the naturalised relationship' between the spectator and the 'desired spectacle' by apparent cruelty in films like *Baise-Moi* and *Irreversible* (Noe, 2006) resonates with Antonin Artaud's concept of the 'theatre of cruelty'; theatre which aims to engage the spectator's capacity for pain and by doing so, attempts to break down the barrier between the viewer and the spectacle. Artaud

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions on 'body genres' see Clover, C., J. (1994) 'The Eye of Horror' in *Viewing Positions - Ways of Seeing Film*. Ed Williams, L., New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press and Williams, L. 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess' in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (summer, 1991), pp. 2-13

argues that an element of cruelty is a necessity for every spectacle and sees the body as a way of getting to the mind by claiming: 'In the state of degeneracy, in which we live, it is through the skin that metaphysics will be made to reenter our minds' (Artaud 1988: 251). He expands on this in his articulations for the theatre of cruelty:

I do believe that the theater, utilized in the highest and most difficult possible sense, has the power to influence the aspects and formation of things: and the encounter on the stage of two passionate manifestations, two living centers, two nervous magnetisms is something as whole, as true, and as decisive, even, as in life the encounter of two epidermises in a momentary lust. This is why I propose a theater of cruelty... a theater that is difficult and cruel first of all to myself (Artaud 1998: 256, spelling in the original)

Artaud's definition of 'cruelty' is not as 'simple' as the representation of performers inflicting bodily harm on each other, but rather a much more complicated and arguably more unnerving cruelty. Artaud defines his 'cruelty' as;

That much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can practice on us. We are not free - And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us, first of all, that (Artaud 1998: 256).

What Artaud is suggesting here is that we should not lull ourselves into false feelings of security and that theatre (as his chosen form of art) can teach us to be alert. His suggestion links back to Howard Barker's ideas of theatre not being a form of entertainment but rather work, its function is not to fool us, to numb us from reality and our lives' potential but the exact opposite! Theatre's function, and arguably film's by extension, is to challenge us to consider that which we actively refuse or forget to experience and take into consideration in the world around us. Although Artaud and Barker are talking about a different form of art, the effect they seek is, I would argue, much the same as what cinema of sensations is set out to do; to engage its experiencers through all of their senses in order to challenge their minds, to address their whole being.

In relation to the two films discussed in this thesis, what is fascinating and useful in Artaud's manifestations is its suggestion of using the skin, the body as 'a way in'. Artaud's theatre is not produced for its entertainment values, but for the sake of teaching, of warning its audience of the sky that might fall down on us, any minute.

There is a presence of danger, of the unexpected in his arguments for theatre, very much like in the unexpectedness of the cinema of sensations. Experiencers of film are not, of course, going to be in danger of any physical harm from the film, a live performance in its unpredictability is a completely different media in this sense. Yet Artaud continues to argue for the same kind of cruelty, and sense of a present danger, to be inflicted to the experiencers of film. In his formulations of film theory Artaud argued that cinema should aim to:

...force its spectators into a position of subjugation to its imageries, with its visual flood of disintegration and disaster; but, at the same time, the theory espouses a violent unleashing of the spectator's senses - those spectators remain alertly grounded in the tactile world, aware both of what the film is subjecting them to, and also incited to react, in simultaneously physical and revolutionary ways (Barber 2004: 25).

Here again, we are asked to 'merge' with what we are watching so closely that it becomes (almost) unbearable. But what is to be gained through this 'merging', what are the filmmakers attempting to achieve with these representations? As pointed out by Asbjørn Grønstad, in relation to the wider international collection of cinema of sensation; 'If there is one common denominator for a cinema with such disparate components, it is precisely this mischievous appetite for the unwatchable'. Grønstad continues: 'To confuse this proclivity with a prosaic desire to shock the viewers, however, would be to miss the point entirely' (2006: 163). It seems that it is exactly that which has been deemed 'unwatchable' which motivates filmmakers to introduce new ways of seeing. One way of attempting to achieve this is tackling imagery and combinations of themes and motifs that we are not used to being faced with. This is very much following in Artaud's footsteps, both in relation to his manifesto for a theatre of cruelty and the necessity of awakening the audience, and his articulations of needing to ground the film 'spectator in a tactile world'. As Grønstad concludes:

Rather than being stigmatized as representatives of an over-hyped 'shock-cinema', I suggest that the films in question more usefully be regarded as an antidote to the numbing complacencies and stock humanity of much mainstream cinema (2006: 164).

Of course, there is a strong argument against cinema of sensations being an avant-garde phenomenon rather than a contemporary grouping of films that use pornography and

gore as mere shock tactics. There is no denying that this form of corporeal cinema has offered the filmmakers the prospect of widespread attention, but the filmmakers themselves have proposed other, more 'noble' reasons for making their films than just personal fame and infamous reputation. Breillat aims to reclaim images of sexuality back from pornography, and to 'imagine re-interpretations of female bodily experience from the perspective of subjective dignity and individual meaning making' (Downing 2004: 273). Dumont is set to disturb the audience because:

People are way too set in their ways, they are asleep. They have to be woken up... You can never definitely say that you are human, you have to regularly be confronted by something, to remind you that you still have a lot to do as a human being, you have to be awakened (cited in Quandt, 2006: 130).

Dumont reminds us here of Howard Barker's and Artaud's arguments for a theatre that would honour its audience through confronting it, through presenting it with new possibilities of seeing. No doubt, for the experiencer, this kind of filmmaking presents a challenge; 'it overhauls the role of the film viewer, rejecting the traditionally passive, entertained onlooker, to demand instead a viscerally engaged experiential participant' (Palmer, 2006: 172). Cinema of sensations may present us with new, transgressive ways of making films, but it needs us, the cinesthetic experiencers to 'step up' and be ready and willing to explore our ways of experiencing films as openly as the filmmakers are exploring the possibilities of their art. As Beugnet sums up:

To open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an art work or a spectacle is to relinquish will to gain full mastery of it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment (2007: 3).

Just as Artaud urges theatre to first of all remind us of the possibility of the falling sky, the directors of cinema of sensations could be argued to urge us, the film experiencers, to ditch our conventional learned ways of perceiving film and become alert to cinema's sensuous possibilities.

### Cinema of sensations and brutal intimacy

Tim Palmer's article 'Under Your Skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French *cinema du corps*' (2006) was the starting point of my explorations in cinema of sensations, or *cinema du corps* as Palmer names it. In his article Palmer identifies de

Van's quite literal body of work to be what he defines as "the *cinema du corps*, whose agenda is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms" (2006: 171). These interrogations of physicality are not about the story. It could be argued that a 'spectator-friendly', rewarding and logical narrative is perhaps one of the first things to be sacrificed in cinema of sensations. The rewards for its experiencer are elsewhere; in cinematography, the suggestive and engaging soundtrack, the play of light and shadow bring forth the materiality of the film encouraging and inviting an engagement of senses, creating sensations. For these reasons Palmer suggests analysing cinema of sensations, which he calls *cinéma du corps*, as a type of avante-garde phenomenon. He suggests that we explore:

how such filmmaking attenuates or strategically abandons narrative; how it conceives of acting and physical performance on-screen as the site of exposure and trauma; how it brilliantly radicalizes conventions of film style and how, crucially, it overhauls the role of the film viewer, rejecting the traditionally passive, entertained onlooker, to demand instead a viscerally engaged experiential participant (Palmer, 2006: 172).

Some theorists (Palmer, Beugnet and others) claim that hostility and denial towards challenging ways of filmmaking, which cinema of sensations is regarded as, are easy ways to dismiss what could be seen as a vigorous, and dynamic attempt to renew an artform. Much like Marks, Sobchack and others who argue for a more versatile way of theorising about film through phenomenology and the haptic, Palmer argues that we should approach the cinema of sensations on its own terms, objectively using the image itself as raw material. He suggests that we should take care in analysing the the fragmentary storytelling and the importance of colours and sounds. In conclusion, Palmer declares:

In essence, filmmakers like Denis, Noé, Dumont and their contemporaries, have engineered a profoundly empirical cinema. Retaining dramatic and character arcs only in vestigial traces, they prefer effect derived from an innovative composite of perceptual encounters, a raw and occasionally confrontational array of cinematic sensations (2006: 172).

The engagement of the film experiencer's sensory world, emotions and reflections on a life lived, makes, of course, the film experience a very subjective matter. How do we then approach analysis from this angle? A sudden touch of a stranger most certainly means different things to you and to me. How then does my experience of that touch

reflect on the representation of a similar touch on screen? On what terms and with what criteria do I discuss or analyse it?

As Beugnet says, these films offer us an opportunity to question our own, passive status, as observers of a film that happens before our eyes:

The films concerned here offer an alternative vision, an affecting and thought-provoking way of questioning our status as observers and 'consumers' of the pro-filmic-reality ... .. As if 'probing a wound', the cinema of sensations tends to move us closer, dig deeper into our perception of things, show that which escapes the naked eye and ear and, ultimately, immerse us in the pleasure and terror of the 'formless' (Beugnet 2007: 16).

The use of the previously discussed theories of film phenomenology, which encourage us to use all of our senses, our bodies as a sense making mechanism, is especially helpful when looking at films in which, as Beugnet asserts: 'the point [...] is not merely to think about the film, but to think *with* and *through* film' (Beugnet 2007: 19, *italics* mine). This is particularly poignant when attempting to understand one's own reactions and responses to a film, as I am doing here. Interestingly neither Beugnet nor Palmer address their *own* visceral responses to the films they analyse, unlike Sobchack, who takes into account 'what *her* fingers saw' before the rest of her caught up with the experience.<sup>11</sup> In the following chapter, I will attempt to follow Sobchack's lead and explore how the films I analyse reverberate in my (the) body.

I have chosen to analyse *Dans Ma Peau* and *Vendredi Soir* as representatives of cinema of sensations, as they both move me in an intense and similar way, despite being very different. My interest in both films was awakened by the sensuality and the somewhat unusual representations of desire and the body. The first time I watched Marina de Van's debut feature film *Dans Ma Peau*, I was warned about its almost unbearable violence. As I had prepared myself for something truly horrific, I was surprised to be enchanted by the child-like explorations of the protagonist, explorations which I interpreted to be prompted by curiosity rather than a will to violence. My body recognised the protagonist's body, not through the cutting into it, but through the trained muscles, the

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<sup>11</sup> Sobchack's (2004: 53-84) essay 'What My Fingers Knew - the Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh' explores the embodied structures that allow for more than merely cognitive cinematic sensibility and shows how cinematic value, intelligibility and meaning emerge carnally through the film experiencer's senses.

tuned, tight, functioning body. My solar plexus tightened remembering the Martha Graham technique from modern dance classes, and for a moment, I ‘felt’ my body as it was twenty years ago; trained, tuned, exercised. Through the experience of having had a highly ‘tuned’ body, I watched *Dans Ma Peau* with or rather from that ‘old’ body of mine, a body that was meant to be explored, challenged, taken to limits in more ways than one.

Claire Denis’s *Vendredi Soir* also demands a visceral engagement from its experiencer, but via quite different cinematic means. Its focus is in the representation of passion and desire, of touch, pure and simple. *Vendredi Soir* draws its experiencer in ‘through’ its superimposed images and evokes haptic vision, a vision that touches the image, in its extreme close-ups. As Beugnet says:

Without recourse to a voiceover, and with hardly any dialogue, the film constructs a vivid sensory world to which corresponds a web of emotions as well as internal reflections: attraction, fear of the unknown, panic and pleasure (Beugnet quoting herself in 2007: 82).

*Vendredi Soir* mesmerised me with its immediate tactile quality. Its images brushed against me. I felt I was being seduced by Paris, by its beauty and charm. The sparse dialogue and the evocative cinematography heighten my sense of touch and electrified my skin, so much so, that when the main characters finally peel their clothes off, I could feel my skin prickle as if waiting to be touched by a stranger. These first encounters with each film respectively, allowed me to see past the violence in *Dans Ma Peau* and freed me to surrender to the charms of the dream-like *Vendredi Soir*.

By following the suggestions of film phenomenology and keeping in mind the ‘framework’ of films of cinema of sensations, I now move on to discuss these two films that have incited my interest in the bodily and visceral experience of watching a film. The sounding board for my analyses is my own corporeal, visceral being with its social, cultural and personal history and preferences.

### 3 SKIN AS A PLAYGROUND - (RE)MARKS of the FILM EXPERIENCE

In this chapter I look at some key moments of *Dans Ma Peau* and *Vendredi Soir* respectively and attempt to trace the cinematic tools and techniques used to make them such visceral experiences for me. I will use the previously discussed methods of film phenomenology and definitions of the cinema of sensations in order to better understand my intense corporeal and visceral response to both films.

Of the two films, I will first look at de Van's *Dans Ma Peau*. The film is written and directed by de Van *and* she also plays the leading role. In the film bodies are depicted 'as matter' and an essential part of representing desire is via depictions of entering into the matter of a body by either cutting or biting into it. Arguably *Dans Ma Peau* provokes a visceral response from its experiencer through some quite graphic depictions of self-mutilation. I, however, will go on to argue that the provocation is not merely in the violent acts the film represents, but also the suggestion of both desire's and pleasure's close proximity to that violence. I will go on to argue that it would be a mistake to think that *Dans Ma Peau* is a film about (just) female masochism in which the female lead is victimised into mutilating herself. Quite the contrary. I will argue that *Dans Ma Peau* depicts a love story, albeit an unusual one, in which the leading character has a passionate love affair that soon spirals out of control. The strong embodied responses are provoked not merely because of the depicted violence, but also through the suggestion of the possibilities of such pleasures being so close 'at hand', to all of us.

I will also argue that *Dans Ma Peau* represents desire without the conventional dichotomy of subject and object, hence complicating not only how we are used to seeing desire represented on screen, but also challenging the reception of the representations. I will argue that the lack of the conventional object of desire 'encourages' the film experiencer to sense her own body's reactions in a different more accurate way than when confronted by a more conventional depiction of a 'love-affair'. This is done through arguably disturbing scenes of what I will be arguing depict auto-eroticism, but could easily be seen as self-harming. Through a close analysis on some particular scenes, I will examine the cinematic tools that are used to 'invite' the film



experiencer to use the whole of their own bodies as 'tools' with which to make sense and meaning of the film, and to encourage the reading of a love-affair rather than self-harming. *Dans Ma Peau* complicates the reading of the film as merely violent by depicting extreme tenderness in the most violent scenes. Furthermore the lack of a conventional 'victim' of horror or object of desire in the film opens up and complicates any reading of it as something other than a film of a 'self-harming madwoman'. I will go on to argue that *Dans Ma Peau* is, in fact, not a film about madness but rather of curiosity, enchantment and passionate desire towards the body one lives through/in.

The violence depicted in *Dans Ma Peau*, is the most typical kind for women: self-harming, arguably a logical extension of socially acceptable forms of masochism in order to fulfil the ideals of female desirability.<sup>12</sup> I have intentionally chosen not to analyse the main character's journey as a descent into mental illness, but rather argue that the unconventional and manifold representations of bodily explorations complicate any straightforward reading of the film as a portrayal of a self-harming masochist. Instead I suggest that *Dans Ma Peau* can be seen - and through a close textual analysis on a few chosen scenes, I will argue that de Van encourages this reading with various cinematic tools - as an alternative, albeit disturbing, love story of the main character with her own body. There is, however, no denying that the scenes are violent. Whatever the main characters intention, she does cut into her own flesh and make herself bleed. She may not cry out in pain but rather sigh out of pleasure, but she is still left bleeding and in need of medical help. This is by no means, an easy film experience. Whether disgusted, fascinated, scared, revolted, enchanted by what one is faced with on the screen, *Dans Ma Peau* challenges its experiencer.

*Vendredi Soir* depicts touch and especially touching skin, in a different way; it evokes a corporeal memory of a sensual, loving or lustful touch. Its desire is between two entities; a woman and a man. Its desire is perhaps easier to recognise, its 'touch' less violent and hence easier to digest. *Vendredi Soir* does not, however, go without

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<sup>12</sup> By socially acceptable forms of masochism I mean (what seem to be) the unavoidable consequences of ideals of desirability and perfection encouraging extreme dieting sometimes responsible for creating eating disorders, depression resulting from self-hatred as the ideal is impossible to achieve, and cosmetic surgery to 'correct' the 'faults' one was born with. Not only are these more or less socially acceptable ways of attending to one's physical body but as the responsibility of one's appearance is nowadays totally of the individual's, one is considered lazy and irresponsible if one does not 'correct' oneself to resemble 'the ideal of the month' as much as possible.

challenging its experiencer; its tempo is slow, its dialogue minimal, its images lingering and 'thoughtful' (full of thought). The camera is as if pondering upon the scenery, the objects and human beings it represents, its unflinching yet gentle persistency not to move on invites its experiencer to look again, not to go for the first, the easiest interpretation, but rather let the images take over, have no meaning or to have another meaning than that which is the first, the literal one. For me, its dreamlike images and portrayal of living on 'borrowed time' brought back visceral memories of spending a few 'dream like' months in the city of Berlin in 1988. The feeling of anything being possible and the easily challenged definitions of reality or duty, came alive when watching the partly animated sequences of *Vendredi Soir*. The film's world is like a fairy-tale developing in its main character's head and being projected into the surrounding world. Its represents skin as a safe and sensuous playground for two people. Rather than cutting into the skin, the skins are fusing into each other and the characters are 'melting in each others' arms'. *Vendredri Soir* lingers on its main characters' skins without any hint of violence. It also portrays a passionate love affair, but its love story is a much more conventional heterosexual one-night stand during a Parisian night of unusal circumstances. It 'thrusts' its main characters into a hurlum of borrowed time during which rules are bent and instincts, pleasures and feelings rule a dream-like night stripped away by the buzzing of traffic the following morning. The film provokes the sense of tactility through its haptic images which travel the characters' skin so closely it is at times impossible to name the body parts presented of screen. The editing superimposes the images on top of each other duplicating a sense of touch as the images brush against each other in passing.

*Vendredi Soir's* dedication to touch seems to consume the whole film. The film seems to have digested its narrative which follows a dream-like logic of the main female's fantasy, its cinematography brushes against and caresses its objects. *Vendredi Soir* is pure cinema of sensations in its slow tempo and unconventional depictions through haptic imagery. Rather than 'forcing' us inside another's skin, *Vendredi Soir* 'invites' us to caress, to perceive the touch, to remember the touch and to feel it. The involvement of memory in the film experience is certainly a subject worth its own thesis, but through the engagement of viscosity both of these films reach deep inside their experiencers' personal memories, encouraging an engagement of their whole being.

### 3.1 Marina de Van: *Dans Ma Peau* (In My Skin)

I will now move on to a closer look at how *Dans Ma Peau* (In My Skin, 2002, France) affects its experiencer. I will follow the chronology of the film in the analysis in order to create a sensation of the way it slowly but surely mesmerized me, drew me in to see gentleness, desire and passion where I was not expecting to find any.

As *Dans Ma Peau* was Marina de Van debut feature film, those writing about her work seemed to be in a hurry to find an appropriate category to put her work into in order to analyse it. She was bundled together with the 'The French Extremists' because of her chosen themes in this film that seemed to circle around, if not directly include, violence.<sup>13</sup> De Van had collaborated with Francois Ozon as a co-writer and actor in films about violence perpetrated on others, using victimized bodies as objects subjected to graphic, violent urges.<sup>14</sup> As her collaboration with Ozon ended, de Van turned the violence inwards and continued to explore the filmed body. In short films *Biens sous tous rapports* (1996) and *Rétention* (1997) de Van explored the ways in which dysfunctional physicality manifests through violence on one's own body rather than that of others. She filmed herself, using her own body as a tool on screen.<sup>15</sup> Experiments on both sides of the camera encouraged de Van 'to conceive of film as the means for startlingly intimate studies - artistic diagnosis - of the body, often her own, on screen' (Palmer 2006: 174). De Van states that she wanted to approach the topic of the body as matter and explore the distance between the body and the self. Rather than being an actor, she wanted to film herself.<sup>16</sup>

The story for *Dans Ma Peau*, was inspired by de Van's personal history. As a young girl de Van was in an accident that left her right leg horribly wounded after a bone protruded through its flesh and skin. She recalls feeling no sense of panic but rather seeing her leg

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<sup>13</sup> French Extremists is a term coined by art critic James Quandt to talk about transgressive work of some French directors like Gaspar Noe, Francois Ozon, Bruno Dumont, Claire Denis, Philippe Grandrieux, and Marina de Van (to mention a few).

<sup>14</sup> De Van worked with Ozon as a screenwriter in *Eight Women/Huit Femmes* (Ozon, 2002) and *Under the Sand/Sous Le Sable* (Ozon, 2001) and as an actress in *Sitcom* (Ozon, 1998) and *See the Sea/Regarde la Mer* (Ozon, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> In *Biens sous tous rapports* (1996) a young woman (played by de Van) is interrupted by her parents when attempting to perform oral sex and later instructed by them on how to improve her technique, and *Rétention* (1997) depicts a young woman (also played by de Van) who becomes obsessed with her bodily functions refusing to discard any of its excretions.

<sup>16</sup> This is on the director's commentary track of *Dans Ma Peau*'s DVD released by Tartan Videos.

as just a deformed object. She and her friends amused themselves by poking the numb skin with needles, which made de Van feel both proud of being able to endure this, but also frightened by this insensitivity (Palmer, 2006). This is where, Palmer argues, de Van's motives as a filmmaker emerges; challenging the cinematic convention that treats the on-screen bodies as means for character formation. Palmer suggests that instead, de Van explores the 'body as matter' abstracted from mind, its nature probed as material substance and the body as a source of merely remote sensation if not complete dissociation. Through this dissociation it is possible to experience the body as separate from one's self and hence even desire it as 'another' as I will go on to argue in this chapter.

*Dans Ma Peau* is a provocative, challenging and arguably innovative piece of filmmaking that complicates representations of desire by presenting them in relation to what could be interpreted as masochism or self-harming, but it could as easily be seen as a self-exploration fuelled by curiosity. This film has haunted me since the first time I saw it on DVD in Spring 2006. Its challenging subject matter, the lingering beauty of its images and what to me was a suggestion of how far one may be capable of disappearing into one's own desire, had a very strong effect on me. So strong, in fact, was the corporeal and very personal effect of the film that it could be said to have determined the scope and focus of this thesis. The alternative representation of desire in *Dans Ma Peau* presents a mystifying and unsettling challenge for me especially as a female spectator. I was deeply fascinated and absorbed into watching another female obsessed with her own flesh and, for a refreshing change, not because she is 'beautifying herself' for anyone else's pleasure, but rather because of an alienation from her own flesh; she explores her own body as a 'lump of matter'. It is precisely this alienation, however, that allows her to later develop an obsessive desire for her own flesh.

The narrative of *Dans Ma Peau* follows a young career-oriented woman Esther (Marina de Van) who is in, what seems to be, a satisfying if slightly unexciting heterosexual relationship. One night, when attending a party, she stumbles in a dark garden and accidentally cuts her leg. At first she does not realise she has hurt herself but rather joins the party on the dance floor. When she finally does become aware of the extent of her injuries, she does not hurry to the doctor nor share the details of the incident with

her friends, but stays at the party and only attends to the wound the following day. The doctor is surprised by Esther's lack of appropriate reaction and jokingly asks: 'Are you sure this is your leg?'. This remark could be seen as prompting her journey into explorations on her body. She starts by reopening the wound, first unintentionally then with intent, after which different parts of her body receive her special attention. Her actions resemble those of obsessive self-harming and take her to the point of auto cannibalism, but are portrayed as fuelled by curiosity, amazement, and a strange mix of hunger and tenderness towards her own body.

The film opens up with Esther working at home with her partner showing her encouragement and support. The health and wholeness of the skin of her thigh and leg is emphasised by lighting it with soft, natural colours. The camera lingers on it, almost as if caressing it, showing it as a part of her body through a panning shot down her leg, as she works on her computer. This 'caressing' of the character's skin sensitises the film experiencer's skin, evokes the tactility, the sense of the touch. In this opening scene, her body is shown as whole, functional and undisturbed. The narrative of Esther's exploration of her body starts when Esther and her friends decide to leave the party they have been at but first Esther needs to go to the toilet. To avoid a queue she goes upstairs in search of another toilet. It is only as she turns on the lights in the bathroom - and sees the bloody footprints she has left on the beige carpet - that she realises she has cut herself, badly. Her first reaction is that of disbelief and horror. She slides down on the floor with her back against the wall examining the torn trousers and the bleeding mess that is her leg. Her facial expressions are those of pain and horror, it seems like she can only feel the pain of her wound now that she looks at it. (*Image 1*).

The facial expressions of Esther, the fabric of the trousers so close to the wound made me feel the sting of it. Esther is shown to connect with the pain only once she sees the blood, the torn flesh on her leg. The redness of the blood introduces smell, I can smell the redness, the blood. The smell of blood is partly evoked by the clinical whiteness of the bathroom, the tiles and the otherwise spotless carpet. The red is also one of the few colours in the scene, hence drawing attention to itself. Also the pacing of this scene is slow enough to allow its experiencer to take in the full impact of the blood and its sticky, messy and smelly qualities.



Image 1 - Esther discovers the extent of her injuries.

We see her dragging herself across the floor towards the bathtub; her leg follows like a strange bloody object that has attached itself to her. We are then shown a close up of her face as she explores the wound with her hands. This marks the beginning of a separation - her body has become matter to explore and we are shown she who explores, not that which is being explored. Such framing is continuously used throughout the film to highlight the separation Esther (Esther's mind represented by a close-up of her face) feels from her body. Her whole body is shown when we are to witness an act from a distance. The use of close-ups also suggests the beginning of fracturing of her body image. Esther becomes distracted by the details, seduced by her body parts in favour of the whole, healthy image of her body as an entity. By concentrating on Esther's facial reactions de Van also suggests Esther is doing this to concentrate on the feeling by blocking out the possibility of being shocked by the image. For the experiencer of the film the cruelty and 'grossness' of this scene is highly dependent on her imagination. De Van does not show the fingers entering and exploring the wound, which suggests this is not a horror or a gore film, not in its traditional form anyway. In comparison one could think of Clare Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2002, France), a film often compared to *Dans Ma Peau*, in which the one of the lead characters Coré (Beatrice Dalle) uses her fingers to poke around the self made opening in her victim. Denis uses close ups and sound to evoke a feeling of violent entry into an unwilling body. Throughout *Dans Ma Peau* de Van

uses a soundtrack which provides a generous basis to the most vivid of imaginations. What our eyes cannot see, our ears hear happening.<sup>17</sup> Laura U. Marks, talks about the memory of touch in the film experience arguing that some films (and by extension) scenes in films:

work by bringing vision close to the body and into contact with other sense perceptions; by making vision multisensory. They do this in part by refusing to make their images accessible to vision, so that the viewer must resort to other senses, such as touch, in order to perceive the image (Marks 2000: 159).

*Dans Ma Peau*'s soundtrack does exactly that, closing one's eyes does not prevent one from 'seeing' what is happening, from feeling the slippery wetness of the wound, the stinging pain of the opening. The sound helps to engender the sense of touch in the experiencer.

the cinesthetic subject names the film viewer (and, for that matter, the filmmaker) who, through an embodied vision in-formed by the knowledge of other senses, 'makes sense' of what it is to 'see' a movie - both 'in the flesh' and as it 'matters' (Sobchack 2004: 71).

This experience of 'vision in-formed by the knowledge of other senses', is a synaesthetic experience for those of us who are not synaesthetes. It is a way of 'making-sense' of the world around us as well as of the films we experience. Sobchack goes as far as to claim: 'We are, in fact, all synaesthetes - and thus seeing a movie can also be an experience of touching, tasting, and smelling it' (2004: 70). I take Sobchack to suggest that we all have a degree of the synaesthetic ability in us. Some of us take it for granted to 'taste the recipe' as we are reading it or feeling the stickiness in our fingers when watching someone accidentally glue their fingers together, but to actually feel the weight, texture, temperature and shape of a taste, for example, is surely a completely different experience (Cytowic 1993). Seeing a touch on screen can awaken a feeling of being touched or touching, watching others being hurt on screen may provoke physical pain in the film experiencer. The boundaries between senses are not as clear as we would perhaps like to think. All of our senses work together to create the sense-making mechanism that we are. This is not only true about making sense of the world we live in,

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<sup>17</sup> When presenting a paper on *Dans Ma Peau* at a conference, I warned the audience of the possibly shocking quality of the images and clips to come. I also advised them that mere closing of eyes would not get rid of the images as their ears would 'fill in the gaps'. Later two people, who had not taken my advice, walked out of the auditorium talking loudly to each other to block out the sound.

but also of the cinema and other forms of art we experience. As Sobchack concludes:

Thus, the cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen - able to commute seeing to touching and back again *without a thought* and, through sensual and cross-modal activity, able to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of cinematic experience onscreen or offscreen. As a lived body and a film viewer, the cinesthetic subject subverts the prevalent objectification of vision that would reduce sensorial experience at the movies to an impoverished 'cinematic sight' (Sobchack 2004: 71)

The act of looking at a female body has been one of the main concerns of feminist film theory and the complex and multi-faceted process of spectatorship has been one of the main ways to theorise male and female viewing experiences. Feminist film theorists (Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Teresa De Lauretis) have argued that woman as a spectator is forced to identify - whether through 'uncomfortable transvestism' (Mulvey) or through masochistic over-identification with the represented females (Doane) - with the male spectatorial position defined by 'the male gaze', created by the camera, framing etc. as well as active male characters and sexual representations which are produced for the male spectators. But here we have a female director acting in a film she has directed, exploring and representing her own body as a 'body of matter'. It is almost as if de Van is 'beating' the male gaze by not only gazing at her body, but digging into it, into the matter of the body. There is room for masochistic over-identification with the protagonist, but I would like to suggest that through stripping the body, her body, of its possible, conventional sexual representations de Van directs us to look deeper, to 'dig in' to the matter of the body and to the roots of our personal experience. As pointed out by Palmer, *Dans Ma Peau* attempts 'to privilege eye and mind... to enter into [Esther's] perceptions and emotions to create a deeper association with her intimate and sensorial experience' (Palmer citing himself in 2006: 179).

This sense of autobiographical work - deriving from the fact that de Van is the writer, director and actor of the film - as well as the author of the film being female, are certainly points that not only drew me to the film but also allow a different level of sensorial reflection for a female film experiencer. Based on Mulvey's framework of masculine address, Doane suggests two options for the female viewer: 'transvestite' identification with the male hero (lacking in *Dans Ma Peau*), subject of the action



(female in *Dans Ma Peau*) or narcissistic identification with the female, the object of the action. This of course does not prevent the male spectator positioning himself into what he might see as a lack, much like in a porn film, where the lack of a male on screen suggests the spectator is to fill it in (Williams, 1990). But although *Dans Ma Peau* may provide a voyeuristic experience, it is not lacking an active agent and rather than sexualising the naked female body, it looks at the body matter-of-factly in natural light, it treats the body as a lump of matter to be explored. Even when the action and body parts are sexualised, no conventional signifiers are used; genitals and breasts remain covered and even in the scenes that I suggest are passionate encounters between Esther and her body, she remains clothed.

The explorations on the body are kept private, there is no traditional victim, nor audience to testify or comment upon what Esther is doing to herself. A visit to the doctor is one of the rare occasions when *Dans Ma Peau*'s protagonist shares the exploration of her body with another person. The day after the party Esther visits a doctor where it becomes obvious that it is unlike her not have felt the injury. Still she fails to laugh when the doctor jokingly asks: 'Does this leg really belong to you?' The way Esther is positioned on the table - her back partly turned against her leg, looking on and observing the doctor stitching her up from a distance - suggests she feels threatened by what has happened like she would rather willingly abandon her leg into more capable hands. (*Image 2*).



*Image 2 - Esther visiting the doctor.*

This scene echoes Sacks's response to his patient who did not recognise his own leg but kept punching it with revulsion.

He seized it with both hands, with extraordinary violence, and tried to tear it off from his body, and failing, punched it in an access of rage. 'Easy' I said. 'Be calm! Take it easy! I wouldn't punch that leg like that.' 'And why not?' he asked, irritably belligerently. 'Because it is *your* leg,' I answered. 'Don't you know your own leg?' He gazed at me with a look compounded of stupefaction, incredulity, terror and amusement - Sacks (1991: 52).

Indeed he did not recognise his own leg, and although Esther's detachment from her leg is not quite as complete, she is here shown to create more distance between herself and 'the leg' through her body language, yet her almost uninterrupted gaze on the leg however suggests an interest, a fascination even similar to 'having' to look at a carcass by the side of the road. Yet Esther seems horrified at herself for not having felt the pain of cutting her flesh open. This 'abnormal' behaviour upsets her and prompts confusion and questions about how what has happened could have happened without her knowledge, and who really owns and controls the body she inhabits. Her attempt to (re-)connect with the leg is through looking at it in the hands of the doctor.

Oliver Sacks's research into experiences of detachment suggest that there is a possibility of a 'separation' from one's body, of a limb not felt to be connected to the whole.<sup>18</sup> This separation introduces a possibility of desire and passion towards that now 'other' limb, not necessarily through pain or humiliation, but rather through curiosity and playfulness, unusual ways to restore a connection with that body.<sup>19</sup> When attempting to understand how Marina de Van's protagonist comes to detach parts of her body from the whole to the extent that she could then be argued to fall in love with them, I was reminded of a case study briefly mentioned in Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985). In the book Sacks describes a young man who falls out of his bed during the night. When asked whether he could think of why this happened, the young man describes waking up in the middle of the night to find the most horrible thing imaginable in the bed with him; a strange, disgusting, inanimate leg. Naturally he throws this horrible thing out of the bed after which he finds himself on the floor. This young gentleman is appalled by Sacks's suggestion that the leg might be his own. Although Esther's horror of not feeling cutting her leg is not completely identical to this total detachment of a part of one's body, but rather based on shock of not having felt the pain she should have felt, it is however a suggestion of a very primal fear of losing control or connection with one's own body. In Esther's case this prompts doubts about *whose* if not *what*, her body really is.

Through a personal experience Sacks later found himself to be a perfect case study for Pötzl's syndrome, a condition which includes peculiar changes in *affect*.<sup>20</sup> Patients who showed perfectly normal reactions in all other ways, showed extraordinary indifference to their affected limbs. Patients might 'find a limb unfamiliar, or be unable to ascribe or relate it to himself -[patients] might wave a limb away, asking the nurse to be so kind as to remove it with the breakfast' (Sacks 1991: 54). Sacks explores the possible medical

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<sup>18</sup> I am referring to the works of neurologists Oliver Sacks and Richard E. Cytoowic in this chapter not only to understand the protagonist of *Dans Ma Peau*, but also to connect back to the idea of the ability of film to create an experience of synaesthesia to the film's experiencers discussed already at length in previous chapters. *Synaesthesia*, as discussed in previous chapters, is a condition in which one sensation involuntarily conjures up another: a smell is sensed as form, a sound seen as colour, a word remembered as a shape, the combinations are unique and numerous.

<sup>19</sup> Sacks's personal experience is relevant as the roots of de Van's interest in exploring the matter of a human body, female body in particular, are in her personal experience of breaking her leg as a young girl and loosing feeling in the area of the scarring.

<sup>20</sup> In Pötzl's syndrome half of the body, or part of it, is ignored or felt as unreal and alien due to a stroke or a tumour in the right hemisphere of the brain (Sacks 1991: 155). Sacks explores his personal journey in *A Leg to Stand On* (1991), New York; Touchstone.

explanations for these dissociations - which were not only neural, but also emotional and existential - as well as his long journey back into a whole body -image.<sup>21</sup> Sacks had no lesions in his brain, he had no stroke or permanent damage to his nerves during the surgery nor was he mentally unbalanced before the accident, yet he utterly 'lost' his left leg for the time it was in the cast. Sacks found out - through extensive interviews and examinations of hundreds of patients - that most of these disturbances were due to the absence of objective neural information from the 'absent' limb or part of body. Sacks came to conclude that as disturbances in body-image can occur even after a short period of a limb being immobilised in a cast, if a part of a body is inactivated for any length of time, it loses its place in the sensory cortex of the brain.

Thus body-image is not fixed, as a mechanical, static neurology would suppose; body-image is dynamic and plastic - it must be remodelled, updated all the time, and reorganise itself radically with the contingencies of experience. Body-image is not something fixed *a priori* in the brain, but a *process* adapting itself all the time to experience (Sacks 1991: 180).

This idea of body-image as a process is useful not only in analysing Esther's behaviour, but also in trying to understand how it is possible for a film experiencer to feel the film in her skin and bones. De Van's experience of having a broken bone in her leg protrude through her skin as an 8-year old girl, spurred her interest in exploring a possible space between one's body and one's self. She describes an experience distancing her body from her self and feeling neither panic nor pain: 'I was watching my leg just like any other object, a deformed object' (de Van, press release: 7). The detachment is probably a result of fundamental shock in the situation but it initiated her interest in the subject. Her fascination grew further as the wound healed and developed scar tissue which she and her friends could poke needles into without her feeling a thing. The insensitivity frightened her yet she was proud of her capability. Most of us have some sort of an experience if a limb 'dying on us', or scar tissue's insensitivity and the uncomfortable feeling of it not being the same as it was before. These memories of our own bodily responses, the way our 'bodies remember', helps us engage all our senses into the film experience.

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<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I will refer here only to those of his findings I suggest will help in analysing not only *Dans Ma Peau's* protagonist's behaviour but also our own experience as cinesthetic subjects.

The times we see Esther's naked body are moments of cleaning, grooming, taking care of its well-being. Nakedness in *Dans Ma Peau* is not erotic, it is not a preparation for sexual engagement but rather a necessity, a mundane act of washing one's self. During the few scenes where we are faced with de Van's naked body in the film, my own response was that of admiration. I recognised a trained body, possibly a dancer's body as she squats down in positions not comfortable for most people. Although there is not an ounce of (extra) fat on her body, it is not anorectic; there are no protruding bones, nor excessive body hair typical to anorexics. To me her body looks trained, disciplined, fit, capable and strong, it is also cast in this role for a reason. Palmer claims that:

the subject of the film, unmistakably, is a protracted examination and systematic analysis of de Van's own body; its narrative is inscribed into her flesh (Palmer 2006: 176).

My recognition of de Van's body as a trained female body, is based on an embodied memory from the days I put myself through vigorous exercise routines to become a dancer. The memory of that training is inscribed in my flesh. As Esther slides down on to the floor to touch the wound of her leg, I can feel the contractions of her body in my own stomach. Under the layers of fat I have since gained, lies a memory of where my centre is, the centre that moves a body in a controlled and well articulated manner. My body still remembers how to connect with that centre. Most of the time the excess weight distances me from my own body. I look at it wondering what 'it' has done to/with my 'real body'. These embodied memories from my past are prominent in my 'profile' as a cinesthetic subject. *Dans Ma Peau* engages all my senses, but primarily my sense of my body, its borders, its inner strength, the sense of touch on my skin - I use my whole bodily awareness in order to 'makes sense' of Esther's journey.

The 'danger', the attacker in *Dans Ma Peau* is continuously present, there is no element of a surprise at a sudden attacker, or a build-up typical to horror films. The danger is oppressive and continuously present, slowly but surely taking us further and further into the 'abyss' Esther has chosen to enter. Also in the arguably violent scenes of cutting in to her flesh, Esther is always (fully-)clothed, the violence is not eroticised in a traditional manner. As she is taking a bath - with her stitched-up leg in a big plastic bag - she stretches the skin of her upper thigh like a child exploring the nature of it, the matter of it. (*Image 3*). Her touch is curious rather than violent, but it looks quite disturbing since

we cannot be sure whether she feels, what she is doing. Palmer argues her skin to be 'strangely elastic' (2006: 176), a curious argument that addresses exactly the point de Van attempts to make about the body as matter: this is the skin of a well-trained body, low in fat and not especially young, this skin will be more loose than that of a young person or a body that contains more fat. It naturally stretches in places where more skin is needed to accommodate the movements of the body.



*Image 3 - Esther in the bath, lighting is natural, comes directly from above rather than highlighting the nakedness of her body.*

We then see Esther changing the dressing of the wound, unavoidably and without intention tearing the wound open again as the healing skin sticks to the cloth. This is yet another exploration of the nature, the feeling and sensation of different matter; skin, cloth, sticky tape, blood, steel of the scissors and provokes more curiosity and marvel at the interior of her body, as well as the wonder of the growing strangeness of it. After the bath Esther's boyfriend Vincent (Laurent Lucas) is shown to worry about her behaviour and doubt her explanation of what happened. Vincent touches Esther when she is not looking to test her sense of feeling. This leaves Esther speechless, and sets the beginnings of the break between the two. Rather than unquestionably supporting her and attempting to help her come to an understanding of how what has happened could have happened, he takes a step back to look at her like a stranger with curiosity and a hint of disgust. Her behaviour is peculiar, out of the ordinary and hence worrying. How

can he trust that she can feel him if she could not feel cutting a gaping wound on to her leg? His behaviour only reinforces Esther's detachment both from him and from her leg. He is as horrified and disgusted as she first was, now she is the only one she can trust, the only one who will have to live with this leg.

Not only are we strangers to those we do not know, we are strangers also to those who are supposed to be closest to us, who are supposed to know us best. Sensing and sensations are unique to each individual, and although through rationalising and talking we try to make others understand what goes on in our corporeal existence, our experience will always stay separate from those of others. As de Van suggests: 'It is through the body that we are there for others. If my body becomes strange or absent, there is no longer a point of contact between myself and others'.<sup>22</sup> After realising that even the person closest to her does not understand her sense of separation from her own body, Esther feels left completely alone, alone in her body.

The first deliberate act of cutting comes with an unexpected urge that de Van describes as 'parasitic compulsion'.<sup>23</sup> The urge overtakes Esther as she works hard towards a deadline, eager to prove her worthiness to her new boss and her colleagues. Her restlessness and inability to concentrate take her down into what looks like the cellar but is later described as a store room. She first scratches and explores the wound with her hands as we are shown a close-up of her facial expressions, then of her whole body as she reaches for a door hinge to re-open the wound and cut into the undamaged skin of her thigh. There is a similar kind of irresistible urgency in her behaviour as that of sexual excitement or perhaps addiction. When looking at Stanton Peele's definition of addiction: 'when a person's attachment to a sensation, an object, or another person is such as to lessen his appreciation of and ability to deal with other things in his environment, or in himself, so that he becomes increasingly dependent on that experience as his only source of gratification' (Peele, 1975: 61), one can see how Esther's behaviour is starting to resemble that of an addict. But her behaviour could also be seen as an act of passion; as irrational, impulsive and forceful as a passionate sexual encounter could be. Parallels between passion and addiction have been drawn in psychological theories of love through, for example, measuring the genuineness of

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<sup>22</sup> On the director's commentary track of the DVD *Dans Ma Peau* (2004) Tartan Films, London.

<sup>23</sup> On the director's commentary track of the DVD *Dans Ma Peau* (2004) Tartan Films, London.



sexual love and passion by its intensity ‘and perhaps even by its very destructiveness to the lovers and others’ (Peele 1988: 160). There is extensive literature on the psychology of love and passion which I will not address here, but I want to draw attention to Esther’s patterns of behaviour which may echo that of an addict, but also those of a person whose feelings of passion overtake those of her rationality.

When she starts cutting into her flesh, her body is framed in a position that again reminds me of a dancer. She is crouching down on one leg, balancing to keep her hand steady. This would not be a comfortable position to a less capable body but allows her access to her leg in an ideal way. The cellar corridor where this takes place is dark, lit only by light coming in through an open door. The lighting highlights the definition of her muscles; they are trained, a result of vigorous practice and discipline, her body looks like that of an athlete. (*Image 4*).



*Image 4 - First deliberate act of cutting, note the lighting of the scene highlighting her athletic body.*

The positioning of her fingers prevent us from seeing the metal incising her skin - the picture focuses on her face and its expressions. In the self-harming scenes the sound caters very much to feed the imagination almost like a horror film might. Unlike for example Claire Denis’s *Trouble Every Day* - which uses music composed for the film (by



Tindersticks) not only to set the mood of overall melancholy of the film, but also to suppress or underline the crescendo of cries of horror and pain - *Dans Ma Peau's* soundtrack rarely offers such relief for its experiencer's ears. In the most violent scenes the soundtrack gives way to the image and the connection of other senses through the image. In the first scene where Esther deliberately cuts her own leg, the soundtrack indulges on the different materials present at the location. Not only do her shoes click on the stone floor but they grind what sounds like small stones against the hard surface. Screeches and squeaks accompany her descent to the floor. As she crouches on the floor exploring her wound with her bare hands, a sound suggests something gnawing into the flesh which has quite a nauseating effect especially as it is accompanied by Esther's rapid breathing, her gasps for air, sighs, hisses and whimpers. When we cut into a close up of her face, the soundtrack introduces a liquid-like sound, almost what one could imagine a finger in an open wound might sound like, suggesting that she is exploring the wound outside our frame of vision. Her probing the wound evokes a sensation of peeling off a scab; I can feel my fingers explore its surface, my nails digging under it to peel it off even though I know I should not. The sensation is that of relief when the scab comes off, even though I know I am tearing some healthy skin with it. Fresh blood oozes in and a new scab begins to develop. I stop there. I cover the new wound with a piece of paper to stop its bleeding.

Esther, however, reaches out of our sight, rummages through what sounds like a tool-box and pulls her hand back into our sight clutching a door hinge. As she opens the door hinge and brings it down on to her leg, the camera slowly zooms in on her. We can still hear her breathing but the more disturbing noise is what sounds like someone or something munching on something edible. The picture closes to show her face and part of her leg but does not show us the cutting. The sound, however, cuts the flesh and our imagination fills in the gruesome details according to our own personal limits. Again the sound provides a suggestion of the possibilities and the spectators' imagination does the rest. There is a clacking noise of the door hinge, perhaps her rings clicking on it, her breath and slight shuffling of her feet as she tries to find the right angle for putting enough pressure on the wound. As she pulls the door-hinge down on her thigh a ripping sound is heard, easily imagined to be a sound of the skin and flesh being torn. We can hear her gasping through her mouth and the scene ends with a sound of something being

torn.

Marina de Van suggests on the audio commentary track that bodies anchor relationships and allow contact with others. If bodies become objects of uncertainty, relationships disappear. There is a short circuit in the relationships of the characters of *Dans Ma Peau* in favour of Esther's relationship with herself; she loses her connection to others as the fascination of her own body continues to grow. Esther attempts to confide in her friend Sandrine (Léa Brucker), but faced with her confused disbelief - Sandrine's unwillingness to, first of all, understand what has just happened and then her confusion about how to respond - Esther belittles her own behaviour, refuses to repeat what she just said and changes the subject. Sandrine's behaviour is like that of a friend who disapproves of, for example, an affair her friend is having with somebody whose marital, social or economical status are not deemed suitable.

Esther's boyfriend Vincent already acts 'jealously' attempting to repossess her body by attending to the wounds, inspecting her for any new signs or marks of abuse, a reaction which may well arise from concern and love, but Vincent's actions only reinforce Esther's problem of her body as a detached object. The growing distance between 'her' and 'her body' is confirmed through others observing it, and attempting to make decisions on her behalf by limiting her personal freedom.

As Esther takes a shower, the camera pans from her feet up to her face. Her toned, naked body is beautiful and unmarked except for her right leg and thigh, heavily wounded and bleeding under the running water. The camera does not linger on either the wounds or her nakedness but rather simply notes the state of the body at this particular time. As pointed out before, the nakedness is not sexualised; even though the camera pans slowly over her skin its purpose is rather to connect the film experiencer with the skin, both her own and Esther's. This panning of the naked skin encourages a sense of it before analysing what we are seeing. As Cytowic says about synaesthesia: 'It's about feeling and being, something more immediate than analyzing what is happening and talking about it. The immediacy and simplicity of it go directly to the heart of the matter' (1993: 176). Although I am fully aware how this reading is complicated by the naked female body in the screen, I am here 'listening' to my own response as a film

experiencer and a cinesthetic subject, and feeling the marvel of the warm skin made whole and pure by the caress of the water. Esther smiles at herself in the mirror as she is drying up. She has cleaned and groomed her body, and through looking at her reflection in the mirror she temporarily restores its wholeness. What is to be noted here is that she is alone in the bathroom, a place of intimacy, grooming and self-examination. The gaze she briefly directs at herself is not judgmental but reassuring.

Esther's dissociation from others is highlighted in one of the following scenes at an office party where 'the boys' try to drag the unwilling, kicking and screaming, fully clad Esther into the swimming pool. Sandrine stares at the scene, refusing to hear or to help. The attack comes to a sudden end as one of the attackers notices the bandage on Esther's leg. Blood is seeping through her trousers. In his interview with de Van, Palmer suggested this to be a reference to a menstrual stain and to provide a link to a feminist agenda, but de Van insisted that "Esther's estrangement is corporeal and not gender-specific, an abstracting form of narcissism that craves tangible release" (Palmer citing himself in 2006: 176). As Esther gets up and sees her blood-soaked trousers, her behaviour changes. Her expression turns inwards, she moves in slow motion, her breath becomes the only audible sound covering other sounds echoing in the swimming hall. The picture focuses on Esther; while the world outside the windows maintains its clear outlines, everything inside the swimming hall is blurry, unfocused. We are not shown anybody else's reaction to what has just happened. We are left to witness Esther's separation from her surroundings.

This haptic vision highlights Esther's detachment from the surrounding world, her perception is shown not to fit amongst the others anymore, her senses are of no use in the 'real world' - her vision is blurred, the sound is muddled if not chaotic, marking the detachment from the diegetic world. It also directs the film experiencer's attention to Esther's inner turmoil. The chaotic, echoing sounds of people in the swimming hall become distorted, muffled, aggressive and overpowering. As Esther sees blood seeping through her trousers the splashing of the water becomes more prominent emphasising the liquid element. Loudness is used to direct our attention to the elements that surround Esther, and fragment her being. The human voices disappear and we hear her fractured breath highlighting her vulnerability and fear.



*Image 5 - Awakening the hand.*

The next short scene opens with her discovering her left arm in the bed under her body, being unable to feel it, to recognise it as her own. (*Image 5*). As she herself stares at the arm and hand in disbelief if not horror, Vincent reaches over and massages the hand 'back to life', back into connection with the rest of her body. This draws our attention to the left arm and hand which have now caught Esther's attention too, and they will be joining her for dinner later that night.

#### Falling in love, limb by limb

A dinner party with important business clients introduces another sense into Esther's struggle; taste. It initiates her mouth, lips, tongue, teeth into her exploration hence making it much more sensual and perhaps easier for the spectator to identify with desire and pleasure. It is also the moment that introduces the idea of consumption into the film. The initiation of mouth and lips also sexualises the touch we are about to witness. Human mouths are primarily used for either vocals, consumption of nourishment or kisses. The engagement of one's mouth in sensual pleasure is a familiar act to all of us. Arguably only a few people bring a door hinge on their skin in attempt to cut into it, but most have at some point touched their own skin with their own mouth; kissed it, licked it, even bit into it. Sometimes referring to a person 'being edible' is a bizarre and quite disturbing way of expressing affection.

When I was a small child, my mother and I had a game in which she would 'measure' how tall I was with her hand. I would lie on the floor extending myself from the tips of my toes to the tips of my fingers and she would measure me using the space between her thumb and her forefinger as a measure for 'one'. She would start from my toes very slowly; 'one' would take her half way up my leg, 'two' covered my kneecap and reached my thigh, 'three' would take her onto my tummy, 'four' onto my chest and if I had managed to stay still this far, all she had to do was look at the spot just below my ear and I would double-up in giggles as she would bury my neck and ear in kisses whispering: 'minä syön sinut suihin!' ('I'm gonna eat you up!') I loved that game! She would not even always have to do the measuring, all she had to do was look at that spot on my neck, just below my ear, and I would get the chills down my bone, and double up in giggles. Both of us still remember that game fondly. I have an embodied memory of the feeling of anticipation and talking about it recently with my mother, over thirty years after it happened, made my neck tingle and fluttered my belly. Indeed sayings like being 'good/cute enough to eat', 'syötävän suloinen', are used in many cultures either as a way of showing affection,<sup>24</sup> or as material for cruel and scary fairy-tales.<sup>25</sup>

These sayings and stories also speaks volumes about the nature of human desire and its possessive nature; if I eat you, consume you, you will truly be a part of me, mine, in me, inseparable. In some ancient cultures the soldiers ate the flesh of a worthy enemy in an attempt to gain their powers, nowadays the disturbing acts of extreme masochism/sadism where lover's genitals are eaten as an act of love and devotion are, the most publicly talked about forms of cannibalism.<sup>26</sup> The subject of cannibalism is also quite disturbingly present in contemporary Western societies' advertising in which cosmetics and food are presented as almost interchangeable suggesting a woman, who uses these products, becomes 'edible', as argued by Heather Brook (2007) in her paper

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<sup>24</sup> For example 'syötävän suloinen' is Finnish for 'cute enough to eat', mostly used by adults when referring to cute babies, puppies etc. people/animals/objects which/who are extremely cute and attractive, although not really for human consumption.

<sup>25</sup> I am reminded of the collection of grisly if not gory short stories for children called *Struwwelpeter* by Heinrich Hoffmann, and especially of its brilliant staging as a critically acclaimed musical *Shockheaded Peter* winner of the 2002 Olivier Award (Opened 2001, London. Directed by Julian Crouch and Phelim McDermott. Music by The Tigerlilies).

<sup>26</sup> One of the most recent cases was the consensual act of Armen Meiwes cutting off Bernd Jurgen Brandes's penis and attempting to eat it with him. Things did not go exactly as planned and Meiwes killed Brandes - a volunteer he had found on the internet - and ate most of his body over the next couple of months. Armen Meiwes was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison for killing his (allegedly) consensual 'victim'.

‘Unpopular Feminism: Consuming Beauty in Women’s Magazines’. The idea of a woman becoming ‘good enough to eat’ by using cosmetic products is a reminder of the bizarre uttering: ‘good enough to eat’, or ‘I love you so much I could eat you’. This sort of advertising, could also be argued to address the very basics of human nature by suggesting that a man (most if not all ads are aimed at heterosexuals) can not only possess but to consume ‘his woman’ and through the consumption *truly* possess her. Of course it is not socially acceptable to eat one’s partner, so we are faced with the idea of self-control again.<sup>27</sup> Who can say no, deny one’s basic urge of consumption when desire is presented as consumable?

As I am not an anthropologist I will not go into more detail regarding cannibalism and its meanings through religion or even ritual. What I want to suggest, though, is that de Van’s portrayal may suggest an act of self-preservation in an attempt to save one’s own body from others, to truly own it through consuming or attempting to preserve bits of it. As Favazza points out, through various medical histories and explorations of rituals and social histories; people who willingly mutilate themselves may do this ‘in belief that their behaviour serves a higher purpose beneficial to themselves or their community’ (1996: 22). De Van’s protagonist is first horrified by her inability to feel her leg to be a part of herself, she goes on to attempt to reconnect with it through regaining feeling of the pain she is inflicting upon herself, but rather than gaining the union that would benefit her, she gets seduced by her body’s growing strangeness. In Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman* the protagonist’s body ‘takes over’ her food consumption; it refuses to consume certain foods and the list of the foods it will not tolerate, grows every day. In *Dans Ma Peau* the protagonist chews pieces off herself in the midst of a passionate affair with her own body.

What first struck me in this peculiar ‘portrayal of a love-affair’ was how familiar it all was, how accessible to me. I do not bite my nails, but I do bite and even swallow the little, hardened pieces of flesh right next to my nails, and I have sometimes wondered how and why is it that I feel compelled to do this? I do not believe I am the only one

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<sup>27</sup> There is a well-established discussion on female bodies in relation to control and food in social and feminist studies which goes beyond the scope of this thesis. For those interested in these discussions of food, control and the Western ideal of the feminine, for example: Bordo, S. (1993) *Unbearable Weight*, London: University of California Press; Braziel, J.E. and LeBesco, K. Eds. (2001) *Bodies out of Bounds*, London: University of California Press and Thesander, M. (1997) *The Feminine Ideal*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

biting my 'finger flesh' either. I have kissed my own hand. I have sucked on a small cut or wound to clear it from impurities and tasted my own blood. I have watched my skin rip after an attempt to remove a bandage that had been placed to help it heal. I have poked the hard skin on the soles of my feet with scissors and ran needles and woollen thread through blisters to dry them out. I have not done any of these acts to hurt myself, I have done them because I could. I have done them because I would not feel the pain I thought I would and that fascinated me. *Dans Ma Peau's* protagonist takes this curiosity a step further, but the origins of it are the same; curiosity, amazement, child-like fascination of one's own body.

Esther marvels at her body the way she would at the colors and shapes of a landscape. This way of seeing the body as matter, that's to say without the intellectual trappings that permeate our view, takes us back to the infantile experience. When I saw the still photographs from the set, I was amazed: I saw my face when I was three, the stripping away, the astonishment, which has to do with childhood, but which I had absolutely not foreseen (Marina de Van in *Dans Ma Peau's* press release 2004: 9).

I would suggest that the childlike regression, the playful poking and testing of the body is the start of Esther's explorations but her curiosity does not stay as an innocent pre-sexual sensuality. The complete detachment of one body part (her left hand) in the restaurant scene, suggests that she has separated from it, it has a life and desires of its own. Carrie Tarr reads the film as a 'spectacle of self-mutilation' with the help of Kristeva's 'abject' and suggests the cutting 'to signify a return to a state of infantile pre-socialisation, a state of formlessness and loss of subjectivity which is (momentarily) a source of nourishment, sensual enjoyment and solitary, erotic intoxication' (Tarr, 2006: 84). Tarr's reading suggests an escape from reality, whereas I suggest a 'heightened' reality, a re-discovery of that which is possible, a re-connection, re-introduction to one's own body, falling in love with oneself one limb at a time.

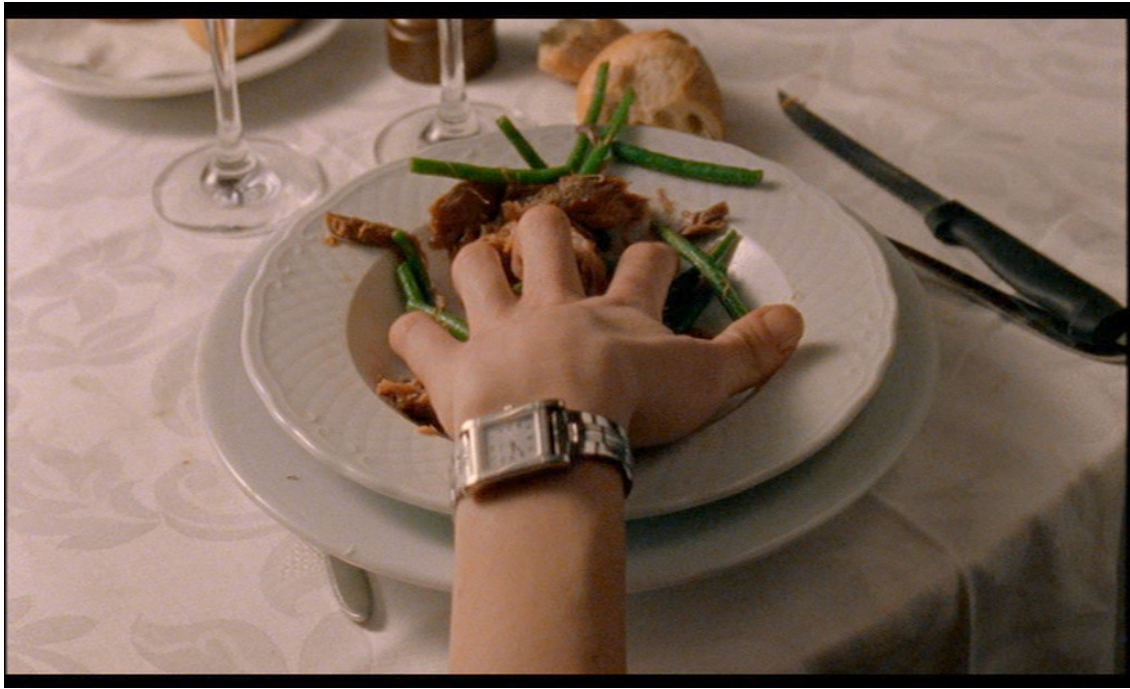
The scene in the restaurant opens with a pan at the level of the table. Esther's left hand is shown through a water bottle, an effect that momentarily swells the hand to look bigger than its natural size drawing our attention to it. (*Image 6*).



*Image 6 - introducing a new character.*

This acts as an introduction of this new character, the left hand, which I suggest to be the mischievous lover intruding upon a formal business dinner without invitation. The whole set-up in the restaurant is that of a struggle for Esther. It is a social situation where she is under relentless scrutiny and assessment, and thus in constant danger of making a mistake. It is also one of the rare situations where Esther is shown in relation to other characters for a length of time; their examining and critical gazes are unceasingly upon her from all directions. The struggle starts with Esther trying to make a good impression on the clients and, after the slightest bit of pressure, accepting a glass of wine. She gulps down the first class of wine quite un-elegantly and continues to drink eagerly throughout the scene, hastening the detachment from others as well as from herself. Soon she is not able to contribute coherently to the conversation but rather ‘floats about’ smiling stupidly, reacting with a delay, and getting disapproving glances from her boss. The female guest comments on her assignment abroad saying: ‘It was like a dream’ which is a cue for the non-diegetic music to set in and we are immediately shown Esther’s left hand crawling on to her plate. The start of music marks the shift from reality into the world of detachment and compulsion. (*Image 7*).





*Image 7 - Left hand enjoying its dinner or placing itself on the plate as dinner?*

Esther taps the hand lightly with the fork, but the hand persists, misbehaves in the company where such behaviour will not be tolerated. Esther seems only slightly annoyed rather than at all frightened by this and continues listening to the conversation. It is very clear that this left hand is not under her control. She is not sure of where and when it is going to make its next appearance. She catches her left hand on top of the meat in the middle of the plate and lifts it back onto the tablecloth with determination. There is an element of teasing and playfulness in this dance between Esther and her hand - rather than screaming out in horror, she attempts to take back control. The hand could also be seen to suggest itself to be edible by crawling on to the plate, which may prompt Esther's desire to taste her own flesh even more. Esther makes a clumsy effort to join the conversation, but is distracted first by what could be seen as a flirtatious smile from the male client and then again by her left hand again squashing the meat in its fingers. She presses the left hand down on the table with her right hand and holds it there.

This 'power struggle' between Esther's left hand and the rest of her, could also be read as a reference to other morbid compulsions, primarily that of eating or drinking too much. Esther has been only playing with her food, she has not eaten it, she has not fed herself properly. It is also part of the decline of Esther from the healthy and active character she was at the beginning.

As Esther traces the left hand with her right hand's fingers; over the watch, past the wrist, she realises that it has been severed from the rest of her. (*Image 8*). There is a clean cut where her arm should continue. No blood, no feeling, no connection.



*Image 8 - Esther's separated hand at the dinner table*

This surreal moment in the film may appear funny or perhaps ridiculous, but it is there to highlight and make visible the level of disengagement, disembodiment Esther is feeling. Her body is not hers anymore; parts of her body have a mind of their own. She cannot control them, they do as they will and she simply tries to cope with the consequences.<sup>28</sup>

The ambient sounds of the restaurant fade slightly to accommodate the music as the conversation continues. As the waiter attempts to collect her plate, Esther seems to think that he is reaching for her cut off hand and rushes to protect it - the music ends abruptly. An awkward moment follows as Esther suddenly and unwillingly gets everybody's attention. We are shown the whole table again, this time facing Esther, as

<sup>28</sup> The protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* loses control of her body in relation to eating. Her body refuses to consume certain food and the list is ever growing: "She had tried to reason with it, had accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled" (2006: 177-78). There is an extensive body of literature on food and female bodies (as mentioned on p. 27), but what is of interest here is the idea of consumption. The suggestion seems to be that in order to remain in control of her own life, Esther needs to consume herself. That is the option she is left with.

she hastily pulls the hand from the table on to her lap. She proceeds to squeeze her wrist in an attempt to pump life into it, to reconnect with it as the conversation continues and others show no sign of noticing anything peculiar. Esther gets a reassuring smile from the female guest and straight after that, realises that her arm is whole again. Just to make sure the arm really is hers, or perhaps wanting to punish it for its tactless behaviour, Esther takes a knife to it and starts poking her flesh. She is not taking part in the conversation, her expression is turned inwards, she is concentrating on the sensation. As she manages to cut through her skin, she explores the wound with her trembling fingers and brings them to her mouth to taste the blood. She continues to pinch the flesh of her arm in what seems an attempt to separate a piece to taste. She does not succeed, and continues with a fork, pressing it into the wound. As the waiter comes back for the plates, Esther is distracted from her excavations and lets out a grunt in discontent. This again brings her the unwanted attention of the table. An awkward silence follows.

As the conversation continues, Esther starts noticing other diners in the restaurant. Watching other people eat prompts her desire to taste more, to feel and explore with her mouth the different textures. It also engages the film experiencer's sense of smell and taste, prepares them for the scene to follow. Esther's gaze lingers on meat being cut and dipped into a sauce, fingers peeling a grape, pulling it apart and getting covered in its juices, fingers tearing holes in stockings. She excuses herself from the table and sneaks away as one perhaps would with a lover in a similar situation or a self-harmer would when facing a compulsion she is unable to resist. But the way she prepares to bite her arm is as if as she is preparing for a kiss - she looks at her arm, licks her lips and presses them gently but firmly around the wound, then stretches her skin with her teeth, trying to bite a piece off. (*Image 9*). Although biting one's own arm certainly is an act of aggression, the lack of blind rage - forceful tearing of flesh, slashing without thought or preparation - suggests that the motive and the sensation provided by the act might include pleasure.



*Image 9 - Preparing for a kiss.*

Like in the first deliberate cutting scene, Esther is again underground in a cellar, away from the daylight, lit by soft, earthy sepia colours. The lighting of this scene as well as the colours of the setting, contrasts with the previous scene in the restaurant and separates the two as completely different moods as well as worlds. Although the scene is coloured to be soft and even protective, it is also setting a mood of secrecy and anticipation through its darkness and underground location. Esther is also somewhere where she is not allowed as a customer of the restaurant. This adds an element of excitement, anticipation and danger of getting caught to the scene. Her passionate encounter with her arm is interrupted as a waitress comes to collect a bottle of wine and is alarmed by the traces of blood she sees on the floor. Esther watches her from behind a shelf. The spots of blood on the floor, the reaction of the waitress and the lurking behind the shelves echo the conventions of a thriller. The lighting is dark and colours are earthly, reddish, and the place itself, the cellar, is a conventional place for scary things to happen in horror films. As Esther returns to the table her hair is messy, she looks distracted and the opposite of someone who has just used the opportunity to freshen up. She is unable to focus, her gaze wanders across the table and out of the window where we see a hotel sign flickering in neon lights.

*Dans Ma Peau* portrays the complexity of (female) desire and desirability arguably through eroticised 'self-harming'. This alleged 'harming' is, however, shown in a light

that renders itself easily to a reading of pleasure rather than pain. The cutting of the skin and body in the film, is not eroticised in the presence of another diegetic person, it is not done for anybody else's arousal or pleasure. The 'bearing of witness' is thus complicated and perhaps personalised for its experiencer, especially as the film engages all of the experiencer's senses in various ways. What makes this so compelling and fascinating, is not only the beauty and attention to detail in the visual aspects with which the main character's journey is portrayed - or the deeply human traits of surprise, fear, worry and confusion of her character which invite the viewer to relate to her journey - but her bemused realisation of what she is doing to her, where her body is leading her.

Even though I am not reading this film as a portrayal of a self-harmer - but rather as an exploration of one's own body in which pain (or the release after the pain subsides) is not the aim - I find it necessary to briefly address the issue of self-harming in order to point out its complexity if nothing else. It is also important to note, that for most 'self-harmers' or 'cutters', cutting is not a sexual act, but rather an attempt at self-healing, an attempt to relief psychological pain or to claim one's body back from dissociation. As Marilee Strong (2005) explains; skin is not only the largest and most exquisitely sensitive of all organs of the human body, it is through the skin contact that a newborn first begins to experience herself as well as the world around her. We are shaped by our earliest primitive sensations and memories that we gain through the skin. Strong says: 'Later in life, the skin becomes not only the receptor of rich and constant sensory input, it also serves as a kind of organ of communication, through which we both experience and express tenderness and pleasure, and alternatively, hurtfulness and pain' (2005: 17). Through history skin has also been manipulated, decorated, scarred, revealed, hidden, tattooed, branded and cut when an individual enters adulthood, or when wanting to declare one's status as a warrior, as a slave or as a wife.

Our skin tells our story but it also separates us from others, as psychiatrist Favazza says: 'All that is enclosed by my skin is me; everything else is not' (1996: 148). However to cut one's skin is not necessarily an attempt to let the world in but as Favazza argues, rather acts as a vivid reminder of where the border is. And it is on this border, that we are for others. My suggestion is that it is this border, this threshold that becomes the playground

of an unusual love affair for *Dans Ma Peau*'s protagonist.

### The secret love affair

The most passionate encounters between Esther and her body happen in the anonymous shelter of a hotel room. The elements of sin and secrecy, all encompassing desire and lust, possible shame and fear of being found out by their partners are present in both this film and *Vendredi Soir*. In *Vendredi Soir* the hotel is shown to be more than just one room. Its doorman is judgemental, the film's main characters are the only guests in the hotel and get to explore it during the one night they spend there together. For Esther, the hotel is a long corridor leading to one room. The limited space of this one room accentuates her isolation from the outside world, it also provides her an escape from home, a haven which allows her to act on her obsessive, commanding and sensual desire for her own body.

In the scene to follow we are shown Esther making love to herself. This is not, however, a conventional masturbation scene as no customary erotic zones like genitals or breasts are shown or touched and it does not end in climax. Rather we are to witness the intensity and the peculiar gentleness with which Esther touches and caresses herself - albeit with a knife and her teeth - which can easily be read as signs of compassion or love rather than hatred and disgust. She is passionately kissing and chewing on her arm as she lowers herself onto the floor. There is no music to soften the disturbing sounds of Esther chewing off pieces of herself. Rather the sounds of sucking, licking, kissing - sounds that might belong in a sex scene, especially as Esther suckles the thigh positioned above her - fill the scene.

The way she kisses, licks, nibbles and chews on herself looks more sexual than violent also because it is continued without pauses, without even involuntary reactions to the pain she is inflicting upon herself. Even more poignantly the positioning of the left thigh above and in front of her is a very traditional positioning in film of a male lover on top of a woman. (*Image 10*). If she was only interested in cutting into her flesh, she would arguably position herself differently - more strength could be easily put on to the thigh if it was under her, immobilised and under her control. But rather than holding her thigh under herself, Esther gives her thigh the possibility to move above her; by not propping



it against anything she gives it an opportunity to have a life of its own; by not restricting its movements and elevating it above her face, she encourages its independence. What highlights this encouraged independence of her limb even more, is that the blood dropping on her face is received with and savoured almost as a touch from another. What she is shown to do to herself echoes a childish fear or perhaps a fantasy or a wish of; what if my arm/body had a will of its own? What is also interesting is that she has consequently slowly 'fallen for' these parts of her body; first her right leg, then her left arm and now her left thigh. She has not, yet, cut just any untouched area of her body, it is almost like these parts, her limbs, have seduced her, especially her arm which has tried its jokes and unruly behaviour even in the company of others.



*Image 10 - The thigh is positioned on top of her like a lover, its shadow covers her face like in an attempt to take control.*

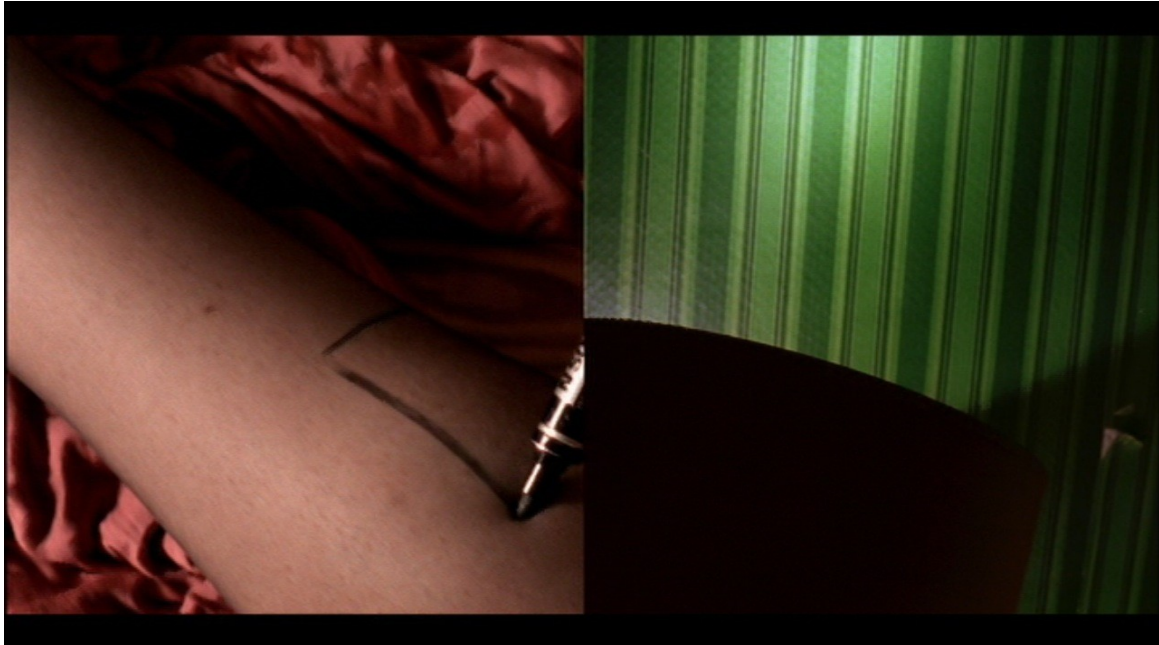
It is in this scene that pleasure or perhaps acceptance seems to overtake pain in her experience. Her face is not shown to contort in agony as she cuts into her flesh, her gaze into her gaping wounds is intense and determined, accepting rather than horrified. Esther's awakening from this passionate encounter is accompanied by non-diegetic music. We are shown a reflection of her whole body, her entity, in the lights on the ceiling. The camera then descends back to her as if to root back to the restored body-image, back to reality as we like to know it. Esther looks around the room, the camera pans - clean, untouched, organised and then her, the only 'thing' out of place, lying in

the middle of the corridor.

Shortly after having staged an accident to cover her passionate night at the hotel, Esther unexpectedly comes across pieces of her own dead skin in her wallet. The pieces of skin are hard, darkened and dead. She attempts to revive them by rubbing lip balm on them - it does not work. She starts to cry. Is she crying for the loss, the death of her lover, loss of her sanity or for the death of herself? Placing her on the street, even if with Vincent, emphasises her vulnerability in the 'real world'. She is facing an inanimate object, a cash machine, when she finds her decaying body parts, reminders of the passion that is suggested to be more real to her than the world she inhabits. This scene is a direct confrontation - Esther is faced with a machine, she cannot remember her password, cannot function without Vincent's help. She is marked as unsuitable for society, the world, her priorities are shown to be elsewhere.

Next morning as Esther heads towards work through the chaos of objects in the shopping mall, we are shown the same blurriness in her surroundings, the haptic vision again suggesting her closing into herself as we were shown in the scene at the swimming pool and at the restaurant. We see a chaos of details that break the unity of her world, also representing the break of the unity of her body. Esther is broken into pieces to be explored, objectified. She can only see detached fractions, parts of the whole - the disturbance in her body-image is represented in the fractured world that surrounds her. The soundtrack is chaotic. Her attention focuses on to herself, in an urge of desire if you will, too strong for her to resist. She shuts the outside world away, moves in slow motion, functions almost automatically and finds herself alone in the hotel room, again. This time she is prepared with a range of objects to cut a piece of skin from her leg, to document the process and preserve the cut off piece in order to immortalise it, to immortalise herself. (*Image 11*).





*Image 11 - The screen splits as Esther prepares to extract a piece of her skin.*

In the last sequence of the film the narrative breaks down, arguably frustrating the spectator as no resolution is provided. The screen is split, wounded, mutilated. As de Van herself says: 'By wanting to look too close, reality breaks apart and the body itself is no longer visible' (press release 2002: 10). Esther looks closely at her body seeing details and failing to see the whole, hence not making the connection between her body and herself, rather concentrating on the fragmented parts. The actual cutting of the skin is not shown at all, but its effect is shown in the disarray and growing chaos of the room. Esther plunges into the matter of her body, and we are shown just the edges of her actions. Marina de Van explains that what we see on the right side screen was actually on her right side and that on the left was on the left, the dividing line in between, the unseen, is the body, very much the same way we never see our own whole body except in a reflection.<sup>29</sup> Only when coming face to face with her reflection Esther regains an awareness of herself as whole, as complete. (*Image 12*).

<sup>29</sup> On the director's comment audio track of the DVD *Dans Ma Peau* (2004) Tartan Video.



*Image 12 - Esther examines her reflection after extracting a piece of skin from her leg.*

Esther plays with her image, flirts with it, explores what it can do. The play in front of the mirror ends in tears, the body-image may be restored and appear as whole but she has made the map of her explorations visible on her body. Facing her reflection upsets her to tears. It is as if only through exploring her reflection she realises how far she has gone, that she might have gone too far to turn back. She has cut her face, made a mark on the 'outside' for everyone to see. The next morning, as she wakes up - covered in dried blood, making no attempt to clean herself, she simply ties her hair up and pulls a blouse on top of her bloody bra - she sees the dried up, dead piece of skin on the bedside table. She is deeply upset by her failure to preserve it. She gently places the hard, brown piece of her own flesh in her bra pressing it against the soft flesh of her breast. This is a part of her own body, a reminder of what she is capable of, and she has failed to provide for it, failed to keep it alive. Placing the dead piece of skin against her breast resonates a maternal attempt to nurture, revive what could be seen as a product of the love affair she has had, perhaps even a love child of her and her body, a child she has now killed.

Only this last encounter is planned in advance, almost as a farewell, the last meeting before the affair has to end. Esther has been guided by curiosity and amazement rather than an acknowledged desire for pain. She is child-like in her desire to explore the

material she is made out of - and is shown to do so in various scenes - to find out what will happen if she does cut her skin, her flesh, bite it and taste it, and as she does, the excitement of an illegitimate act borders on, and later turns into, sexual arousal. Her behaviour is auto-erotic in a way that she does not need outside stimuli apart from the equipment she uses to cut into her flesh, she has become the ultimate love- and sexual object for herself, her body being presented as an illicit lover with a will of its own.

The film ends in a continuous circular movement opening from an extreme close-up of Esther's eye to reveal her whole body only to return back to her eye which one could argue the film is all about - her attempt to re-connect with her body, to re-store her body-image, to make herself whole but instead getting distracted and side-tracked by the fascinating details. Non-diegetic music accompanies. The peacefulness of the symmetrical composition and continuous movement suggest emptiness, an emotional void especially after the disarray of the previous scene. But the scene is also reassuring in its continuous repetition of the circular movement and the earthy colours of the set - green wall paper, ochre bedspread - suggest a return to natural, being part of the nature or perhaps an earthly grave, lying motionless on the earth coloured bed waiting for the end to come? (*Image 13*).



*Image 13 - The last frame shows Esther returning the gaze from her earth-coloured bed.*

We are left to imagine the next step or the sheer impossibility of one as the case may be. This last shot shows the entity Esther is left with, a constrained world she has created for herself within her body. It is at this point that de Van allows Esther to return the gaze, she looks straight into the camera unflinching, challenging the spectator.

Marina de Van wanted to approach the theme of body in a very elementary way: body as matter, and what happens if this body of matter becomes strange to the person who inhabits it? Her explorations are not easy to watch, they may even provide the spectator with a masochistic experience, but they address an issue relevant to all of us despite our gender. Through a closer look at some of the scenes I have shown the various ways *Dans Ma Peau* engages its experiencer's senses and provokes a visceral response. Through this analysis I have also complicated any straightforward reading of this film being plainly about a descent into madness, or of a woman obsessed with her physical body so much she is determined to punish it through masochistic, self-harming behaviour. *Dans Ma Peau* is a film that addresses all of its experiencer's senses, and a perfect example of cinema of sensations; it provides its experiencer with uncompromising, stimulating, challenging and brutally direct intensity. What it does not provide is a resolution or a safety net of a laid-out interpretation. It should be watched with an open mind and engaged senses.

*Dans Ma Peau* is still one of the 'hardest' films for me to watch. It gets under my skin, quite literally as I watch it in my study from my laptop, feeling as if I was in Esther's skin, watching her muscles awakening the sensation of a trained body. As I screened it to my fellow postgraduate students, I was alternatively ashamed and proud of putting them through the experience, but the discussion afterwards was lively. Some had felt themselves shut down in an attempt to preserve themselves from what they experienced as mere horrors on screen. Eyes had been closed only to discover the power of the aural sense. Cuts had been heard and emotions confused as what was previously interpreted to be only painful, was suddenly challenged to be seen as pleasant for the protagonist. I had watched them in the cinema, sinking deeper and deeper into their chairs, hiding behind their knees, holding on to their bodies and I saw how their bodies were engaged in the film experience. Their bodies were trying to make sense of what they were experiencing and even when intellectualising about the experience later, a hand would

cover a belly to protect it from the images. *Dans Ma Peau* explores the human body, not only through its protagonist but also through its experiencers. It presents us with a challenging portrayal of a love affair, of desire and sensuality, asking us to reconsider, to feel, with all our senses, the possibilities of our own body as well as those of others.

In the other film explored in this thesis, desire takes a completely different appearance and the ways in which *Vendredi Soir* affects, sensitises and 'touches' its experiencer, also differ from those of *Dans Ma Peau*. Watching *Vendredi Soir* is like watching a snake being charmed, or rather being the charmed snake. Experiencing it is like being led by an experienced tango dancer when having little experience oneself; trusting the strange partner, enjoying the 'ride' and not knowing what comes next. *Vendredi Soir*'s ways of mesmerising are apparently very different from those of *Dans Ma Peau*, or are they?

### 3.2 Claire Denis: *Vendredi Soir* (Friday Night)

This chapter explores *Vendredi Soir* and the ways in which its superimposed images and creations of in-between-places are used to awaken and heighten its experiencer's senses. Rather than using violence, or relying on the affects of unsimulated sex on its experiencers, *Vendredi Soir* incites its experiencer's sensuous being and sensual memory by exploring the pace and fluidity of desire. It does this through an exploration of a one-night stand via the pace and intensity of the lovers' meeting, of their caresses, during a night when time seems elastic and anything might be possible. The film 'lifts' its main characters from their mundane everyday life, giving them one night of 'borrowed-time' during which ordinary laws and regulations do not apply. During the night they spend together they are allowed to speed down the streets in reverse, to have an affair, to daydream even of the impossible without any apparent consequences. The analysis in this chapter also follows the chronology of the film, but quite loosely. As the film encourages a dream-like interpretation, I have followed its initiative and lifted moments which highlight the sensuous qualities of the film experience, rather than analysing each scene in detail as I have done with *Dans Ma Peau*.

#### Exploring desire

Martine Beugnet (2004) explores *Vendredi Soir* as one of the films by Denis which create a 'mise en scène of desire'. She notes how Denis's films evade conventional romantic frameworks and instead explore desire's complex, melancholy, tentative and even morbid sides. Beugnet points out, that:

The representation of desire, explored in its emotional, sexual and subversive aspects, is indissociable from the director's elaboration of a 'cinema of senses': a cinema that relies, first and foremost, on the sensuous apprehension of the real, on a vivid and tactile combination of sounds and images that expand cinema's primarily visual powers of evocation (Beugnet 2004: 132).

Beugnet continues by arguing that Denis's filmmaking confuses the traditional processes of identification and point of view by allowing desire - innately linked to transgression - to emerge in its ambivalence and diversity. Beugnet states that Denis's filmmaking:

threatens the integrity of the body and of the self, and reveals the fragility of the human mind and flesh, beset by a sense of loss and lack and always at risk of dissolving into desire, to be 'consumed' by it (Beugnet 2004: 132).

The scenes of displacement and 'in-betweenness' anchor the otherwise fluid and ambivalent nature of the main character Laure's (Valérie Lemercier) desire into 'normality' albeit by contradicting or at least challenging it. 'Displacement' is a reoccurring theme in Denis's work, it mostly intertwines with the representation of the (colonial) 'Other'. In reference to *Vendredi Soir*'s characters Beugnet points out:

On the one hand, the tactile gaze of the camera establishes an intimacy with them as physical beings. On the other hand, the film weaves around the subjective world of sensory affects with which the viewer can identify or empathise (Beugnet 2004: 192).

Beugnet argues, and I agree, that the evocative sensation created by the images invite the film's experiencer to identify with, or at least empathise Laure's subjective perception thus allowing an understanding of Laure's attraction to Jean (Vincent Lindon) as we are drawn into the film's rich sensory world.

In *Vendredi Soir* Denis also reflects on 'the changing nature of human reality and time' (Beugnet 2004: 43). This exploration of the changing nature of human reality and time could also be seen as an exploration of the changing nature of desire. The focus here is not on the dichotomy of the two genders of its main characters, but rather an exploration of the nature of desire, reality and time. It is almost as if desire is the vehicle the main character Laure uses to test the boundaries of her reality as well as her body. She melts on to the skin of a perfect stranger, disappears into his overcoat as if borrowing his identity for a moment, in an almost 'un-real' and 'timeless' existence created for them both by the traffic jam that appears to close down the whole of Paris for one night.

Rather than writing a script herself, as Marina de Van did for her film, Clare Denis used Emmanuèle Bernheim's novel for the story and premise of the film. Bernheim then adapted her own book into a film script for *Vendredi Soir*. Denis has said that she was not interested in a literal adaptation of Bernheim's book into a film, neither did she want or feel the need to use voice-over or extensive dialogue to explain the story or the

characters:

Cinema is not made to give a psychological explanation. For me, cinema is montage, editing. To make blocks of impressions or emotions meet another block of impressions or emotions, and put in between pieces of explanation, to me it's boring... Our brains are full of literature - my brain is. But I think we also have a dream world, the brain is also full of images and songs, and I think that making films for me is to get rid of explanation (Denis in Romney 2000, cited in Beugnet 2004: 20).

*Vendredi Soir* intertwines 'dream world' or fantasy and the 'real world' with a contemplative, dreamy pace of the film; by interrupting the film's reality with short sequences of animation and allowing the developing desire to take its own time, and by using extensive music to speed up and slow down the pace of the night. The film's pace and focus are on sensing the world, not merely seeing it, not merely hearing it but feeling it through and in the bodies of its characters. I would also argue that the sparse characterisation, focuses our attention on the rich sensations the film creates. Also the film's limited time frame frees us to slow down and focus on that which is here.

It seems that one of the aims of the film is also to challenge if not confuse the spatial relationships between people, objects and spaces. It is as if the main characters as well as the places they occupy leak into each other; through extreme close ups in which it is impossible to tell body parts apart; through soft focuses that allow light and colour to play on the visual imagination; and through superimposed images. The editing 'melts' the images into each other, as the different materials the characters either wear or touch, evoke a sense of tactility through pairing unlikely materials with each other like bare human skin and the rough material of an overcoat. The invisible, the attraction and the sexual desire between the characters is thus made visible. The pace of the film, the dream-like quality of its cinematography, editing which makes the images flow not only from one image to another but through each other, and short animated bursts that punctuate Laure's changing moods throughout the film, are also all techniques which anchor *Vendredi Soir* into the cinema of sensations.

The film's minimal dialogue seems to be the concern of both audiences and critics alike when discussing the film. Even a complete lack of dialogue would not, however, be the same thing as a lack of narrative as argued by James Travers in his otherwise very



favourable evaluation of the film:

The lack of narrative content will doubtless alienate many potential spectators, and its implausible plot (a somewhat risible female fantasy) will put off others. However, for those who can appreciate slow-moving, lovingly crafted pieces of cinema, Claire Denis' *Vendredi Soir* is a film to savour - a sensuous, satisfying and strangely surreal evocation of ennui and desire (Travers, 2002).

Contrary to Mr. Travers's claim, I would argue that the film has a clear narrative of a love affair and its minimal dialogue only highlights the sensuous quality of the affair it describes. Its minimal dialogue may alienate some of its experiencers, but its rich sensory evocation more than makes up for the sparse dialogue. *Vendredi Soir* presents an invitation into fantasy, an alternative to reality. Travers is worried that the animation sequences weaken the film's credibility: 'Such gimmickry may be becoming de rigueur in other film genres but here it appears faintly ludicrous and serves merely to weakens the film's credibility as a "serious" work' (Travers, 2002). I would argue that the animation sequences are well-thought out cinematic vehicles with which to refer to desire's playful, inventive and mischievous side and to test our borders of acceptance as film experiencers.<sup>30</sup> Not only do these sequences remind us of the fact that how one person perceives the world is by no means the same as the person next to her, the animation sequences also interrupt the pace of the film, very much like acts of violence do in a different kind of film.

The pace of the film is slow, or rather tentative, like a first touch. The fluidity, the presence of the unexpected is also highlighted by the soundtrack which not only emphasises the changes through rhythm, but at times evokes a stronger sense of touch and tactility with a well placed silence or accent. As Beugnet points out, the changes in rhythm and mood of the soundtrack: "reflect characters' own momentum and hesitations" (Beugnet 2004: 188). The sound world of the film emphasises the ambiguity of desire, its fragile nature as one interruption, one wrong move could set the two strangers apart, miles apart, before they ever even get a chance to meet.

The film could be argued to suggest that it is not the goals achieved which guarantee us pleasure, but the journey towards the goal, the savouring of the in-between-places and moments, emotions, bodies, skins, humans, purposes of use of a space. *Vendredi Soir* is

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<sup>30</sup> Examples of animated sequences will be explored later in the chapter.

firmly rooted in 'no man's land', in the quick-sand of reality and the main characters' encounter takes place on 'borrowed time'. It is as if this one night between Friday and Saturday - when the whole of Paris is in chaos and Laure herself is in-between her old life and new life - creates another dreamlike dimension, a 'borrowed time' where everything and anything is allowed and possible. This state of 'in-betweenness' frees her imagination, allows her to act spontaneously and follow her unexpectedly rising desire.

I now move on to take a closer look at the film through some selected scenes. The main premise of the film is a story of its (female) character Laure who is leaving her flat to move in with her partner. She has been invited to dinner at a friend's place on the last evening at her old place. On her way to dinner Laure finds out that the whole of Paris is paralysed due to a general transport strike. Laure gets caught in the enormous traffic jam and shows solidarity by offering a ride to Jean. A strong mutual attraction develops and they spend a night together in a hotel.

#### Moving the Parisian way

After setting up the premise of the film by showing Laure amongst boxes in a half empty flat in Paris, a short scene in the bathroom introduces us to Laure's vulnerable, sensuous skin. By not showing her skin again until the end of the film, Denis sensitises us to feel Laure's skin under her clothes throughout the film. (*Image 14*).



*Image 14 - Laure - shot only from behind - is vulnerable and oblivious to the world outside the bathroom.*

The bathroom is an extremely private space. It is also a place of vulnerability, a fact which is often used in film genre traditions like horror films as a place where the victim gets attacked. Laure is here placed in the very same spot a victim of a potentially terrifying act might be in such a film. Her back and neck are naked and exposed, she is vulnerable and defenceless. She looks young and unblemished, her skin almost faultless. The bath is a safe place for her. The soapy water covers the lower half of her body. She is protected by the water, rooted in it, disappearing in it, it is as if she is made of it. A mermaid-like being growing out of the water, a being whose legs we are never to see (*Image 15*). As in *Dans Ma Peau*, the camera does not linger on her female nakedness by exposing her, but rather caresses her with a slow tilt on her back, the camera movement caressing her like the water or a touch on her back.



*Image 15 - Laure is rooted to the water, half disappearing in it, caressed by it and the sweeping of the camera on her back.*

Watching Laure wash herself is like watching her caress herself. The shampoo slides down her naked back, also caressing it. The scene also draws attention to her hair, which plays a part as a marker for her sensuality. Human hair has played a significant role in marking one's attractiveness as well as availability in society. Throughout centuries in many (Western) cultures married women no longer wear their hair loose,

but rather braid or 'bundle' it. Monks and nuns shave their heads and some offer their hair to their gods as a sign of respect and devotion. Knights and musketeers paraded their sexual availability and alleged sexual skills by allowing their hair to grow in demonstration of their vitality and virility. Hence it is not unimportant that Laure's wild, curly hair should get her attention just before she meets Jean, as well as later in the film just before they 'decide' to spend the night together.

Unconventional uses of objects and places is a recurrent theme in the film; rather than taking a bath Laure uses a shower head in a bathtub; she dries her hair with the car's air-conditioning system; the car is not only a vehicle taking her from one place to another, but also a shelter and a haven from the chaos outside, a travelling arm-chair to read a book in. Clothes act as extensions of identity as she slips into Jean's cigarette smelling coat and socks in the hotel, as if borrowing his identity for a moment, attempting to get closer to him, to get under his skin. These unusual possibilities of familiar spaces and objects render visible the fluidity and versatile, multifaceted nature of desire, but also awaken the film experiencer's senses to unfamiliar sensation in unusual places. Spaces as well as moments are experienced as if for the first time. The stranger's body and skin are explored as an unknown, unique gift.

As Laure sits in the traffic jam men roll by in their cars as if in slow motion. This dream-like slow motion anticipates a departure from Laure's diegetic reality; Laure is entering a dream world of borrowed time. In the dark of the Parisian night, Laure goes towards the light like a moth towards the fire; she enters a lit phone booth to make a phone call. As the only lit up place in the darkness it suggests that anyone entering that booth will be vulnerable, exposed. Like using a torch in the dark; being able to see where you are going but making yourself vulnerable by allowing everybody and everything in the darkness to see you. The glass box of a telephone booth displays her, frames her vulnerability to be looked at from the outside. (*Image 16*).



*Image 16 - The phone booth is lit against the darkness of the city.*

A slow cross-fade superimposes the lit up windows of the houses to Laure. (*Image 17*). This technique suggests, yet again, fluidity of worlds, the state of Laure's 'in-betweenness' during this one night when she has left behind that which is old, but has not yet entered that which is new and still strange to her. Other people's lit-up homes are brushing against Laure, caressing her cheeks, making impressions on her. She is 'touched by' homes, safety and security, family unions, places that people call 'ours' whereas she is adrift in between worlds and places.



*Image 17 - Laure practises saying 'chez nous' (ours) in her car, the idea or ideal of a home imposed upon her as a reflection from other people's homes.*

This editing technique of superimposing images plays an important role in the creation of an impression of touch and tactility to the film's experiencer. The pictures float in slow-motion as if thoughts in and out of her head, creating an impression of a caress.

From the tranquility of this reflective state of the character we are yanked back into the tumultuous outside world. The traffic jam is like a chaotic yet perfectly choreographed ballet: horns, engines, people squeezing in between cars, cars so close together they are almost touching. There is constant movement around Laure and her car but nobody is getting anywhere. Laure stares at the back of the car in front of her and a surreal animation sequence highlights the absurdity of the moment emphasising Laure's detachment from her surroundings. The letter 'S' jumps over VALVE and settles after the letter E. A similar kind of effect is used in *Dans Ma Peau* at the dinner table scene, in which a similar surreal moment accentuates a detachment from the world around, a withdrawal into one's self. The mood here, unlike in *Dans Ma Peau*, is not ominous or threatening. There is no danger in being 'lost from the world' for a moment, quite the contrary. This detachment is shown as a child-like, playful choice of Laure's, rather than an obsession she would need to fight against. This child-like pleasure of being able to 'play' with her imagination continues as she happily hums a 'silly pop tune' whilst

completely in her own world. She feels safe in her haven for the night; her car which is packed with her belongings. She seems settled into her surroundings, quite enjoying this adventure she is on. She makes herself more at home by reaching to the back seat and fumbling through the boxes for a book to read. The boxes of books are significant in creating yet another in-between place. This is not a mere car, it is a place to keep warm, to read and relax in, to spend time in and get lost in the worlds created by the books one reads.

The pop tune fades away and the soundtrack changes from the honking horns into a more classical score. The music, composed for the film by Dickon Hinchliffe from the *Tindersticks*, emphasises the calmness of Laure in these scenes despite the chaos outside her car.<sup>31</sup> The score begins like a ball-room waltz as the cars negotiate the narrow spaces and slowly inch past each other. Their proximity to each other is tangible; they circle each other in anticipation as if they were caught in a bizarre courting game of automobiles. Humans dart in and out from between the vehicles busily attempting to get on with their everyday lives. The pace of the sequence is contemplative, the editing of the pictures of the Parisian winter night creates a sense of chaos; a steaming bonnet of a car, square white lights of the cars gleaming, slow crossfade into an empty platform of an underground, then slowly crossing back to the traffic jam; sleeping people in their cars, neon lights of the city.

The soundtrack is essential in creating a sense of the kinetic and corporeal world of the film. It emphasises the spatial relations between humans and objects in the film's different scenes. During the scenes of the traffic-jam the sound of car-horns and revving engines governs the soundtrack creating a tangible feeling of a chaotic and busy city. The fact that the soundtrack is dominated by the sounds of traffic also at the moment of Jean's introduction, seems to suggest he might be a creation of the traffic jam; born from the chaos the city is in. (*Image 18*). His first appearance is accentuated by a few chimes as if fairy bells that finalise his creation. If nobody else reacted to his presence, one could argue him to be merely a fiction of her imagination; a wish-come-true, a man created from unexpected events just as she is in-between her old and new world.

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<sup>31</sup> The *Tindersticks* are a band Denis uses a lot in her films. The soundtrack of *Trouble Every Day* (2001, France) is also their work.





*Image 18 - Jean appears, as if created by the chaos of the traffic jam.*

A quiet and lonely piano accentuates his 'alone-ness' and stillness amongst the chaotic traffic. The melody is drowned by the chaos of Paris, the noises of people and cars. The framing of the meeting of the two main characters of the film in close-ups, evokes a sense of close proximity; it links them together. The closeness also establishes the (lack of) distance 'we', the experiencers of the film, are going to maintain from them.

A faint piano melody accompanies Jean as he approaches Laure's car. The strings bring a fairy-tale quality to an image of an unknown blonde woman in her car; a possibility of a diversion for the story. But images of this woman are layered upon images of herself, her images are only touching her; the editing suggests that there is no room for anybody else in her story. Beugnet (2004) refers to these various introductions that punctuate the beginning of the film as 'false starts', I suggest that they function as reminders of the various possibilities as well as (lost) opportunities of every moment in a human life.

There is a knock on Laure's window, a short dialogue follows before Jean enters her car. He immediately takes charge of the small (almost claustrophobic) space and reclines the seat to make himself more comfortable. Laure attempts to accommodate the new body that has entered this small and intimate space that is her shelter. The closeness of the two characters evokes a feeling of being in a car with a total stranger, or forced to sit



next to someone wearing bulky winter clothes in a crowded bus. The possibilities of taking distance from the other person are limited. The camera is positioned either on the back seat or momentarily replaces one of the characters to explore the other. It keeps us almost continuously at a touching distance from both characters. A close-up of Jean touching his hairy chest and Laure witnessing this, suggests a curiosity, a beginning of an attraction. It is also one of the rare moments in the film in which someone is made an object of another's desire. The soundtrack is filled by long, almost ominous phrases by strings. A harp-like chord acts like a sprinkle of sleeping-powder; both characters close their eyes and are fast asleep.

This scene of their first encounter establishes not only the main characters of the film, it also denotes the budding desire between them. This is done by the framing of the characters in close-ups and 'forcing' the film's experiencer to maintain a 'touching distance' from them (almost) throughout the film. The third main character of the film is the city of Paris as a backdrop of their affair. The city is not only 'allowing the affair' it is inviting it. The sense of this is evoked especially through the editing which explores the city as one might explore the body of a potential lover. The images of Paris and its streets at night paint a picture of an enchanting, dangerous, seductive, beautiful and magical city; the superimposed images slowly dissolving into one another, the images touching, caressing each other in passing, foreshadowing the caresses to come.

Jean lights a cigarette engaging yet another sense: smell. Attention is also drawn to his mouth, his lips touching the cigarette. Throughout the film Laure responds to the smell of his cigarettes. She inhales as he lights up, she smiles ever so slightly to herself. Their car slides past a couple kissing on the pavement highlighting the oral pleasure some might get from smoking cigarettes, or from kissing. Laure's reaction and the image of the smoke snaking out of the window, invite the experiencer to engage their sense of smell and taste. For those familiar with the smell and taste of cigarettes the smell attaches to Jean's character, it is evoked each time Laure buries her face into his coat; as she smells her fingers after touching the steering-wheel after him; as she picks up his pack of cigarettes from the bed. The smoke seems to invite Laure to dream about the possibilities between herself and this stranger. She imagines a scenario in which she invites Jean to join her for dinner with her friends. This brief sequence suggests the

developing attraction between the characters; Laure is already thinking of what might happen between the two of them.

She leaves the car to make a phone call to her friend and momentarily loses the car into the traffic. Jean finds her and escorts her back into the car. As they get back into the car there is a tangible shift in the tempo and mood of the film. Jean directs Laure on to the passenger's seat as he takes the wheels and revs the engine. The tempo is increased by fast-moving travelling shots from the car window, the dramatic, accented minor chords in the music add to a feeling of loss of control as Jean speeds down the now suddenly deserted side street. Brakes screech and the streets, shops and people flash by Laure's face almost as abstract forms of light and colour. The effect of images flashing by, the soundtrack of furious music accompanied by screeching wheels and honking horns is like that of an uncontrollable fairground ride evoking fear through the loss of control. This sequence serves not only to highlight the vulnerability of Laure in the situation, but also to heighten the film experiencer's senses for the love affair to come. The sign of the 'Hotel Charm' she passes on the street is offered as a suggestion, a possibility. We are shown what might be going through her head; the uncertainty of her attraction poignantly portrayed in the shaking image of the hotel front through a hand-held camera. (*Image 19*).



*Image 19 - The lights of the hotel signs shine inviting, although a bit cold and hence possibly dangerous, in the darkness.*

A similar suggestion is used in *Dans Ma Peau* in which the main character sees the hotel sign and sees it as not only an escape route from an impossible situation, but it also 'seals her faith' in what she is going to do. Here the hotel sign plants the idea at least to the film experiencers' mind. The traffic jam, this unexpected night of chaos, has offered Laure a possibility to step outside the rules. The hotel sign suggests a place in which to spend her borrowed time. The colours and light in the images play an important role; the hotel's neon sign is blue; calm, even cold, but the café in which Laure will find Jean, has a neon sign that burns in passionate red. The colour red offers warmth, passion, even love, and the sign also advertises his smell 'tabac' (cigarettes). A close up of the sign superimposed on top of an establishing shot - images yet again touching one another, brushing against each other - also foreground the possibility of touch, of caresses yet to come. (*Image 20*).



*Image 20 - The neon sign of the café is burning red, also the cigarette sign 'tabac' guides Laure to Jean.*

Whilst in the café, their mutual attraction is confirmed by the music accentuating Jean touching Laure's hand gently. The attraction is made visible through a brief slow motion sequence as they squeeze past each other on a staircase. (*Image 21*).



*Image 21 - Laure and Jean passing in slow motion, brushing against each other like superimposed images.*

After facing each other on the staircase, Laure's reflection is fragmented by the mirror. (Image 22). A stripe of orange-red paint that continues from the door over to the mirror seems to cut her face in half in her reflection. This fragmentation seems to suggest that only half of her is allowing the realisation of her rising desire to sink in. Only the visible half of her at that moment in time, is allowed to connect with her desire, seeping in in the form of the red-orange paint.



*Image 22 - moment of realisation, of acceptance and a split from reality.*

The use of red as a colour of passion and desire continues in the next scene as Laure and Jean leave the café. The café, which fills a corner of a street, is shot from across the road showing its red neon lights and red canopies leaking warmth into the dark night. As soon as Laure and Jean leave the café it closes; the lights go out one by one as if the couple take the warmth, the promise of desire and passion with them. The music fades under the sound of traffic.

### Unfolding desire

The camera holds Laure and Jean in a medium-shot as they check-in to the hotel. Even though the hotel is empty except for the two of them, the framing of them in medium shots or close-ups manages to quickly re-build the level of intimacy (between the film

experiencer and the characters) that had been achieved in the car. The hand-held camera wobbles in an effort to focus on the unfamiliar bodies, its instability conveying the characters' uncertainty with each other as well as the place they are in.

Music carries them over the threshold from the corridor, the still more public space, into the privacy of the impersonal hotel room. As they start exploring each other's bodies the music fades away and the soundtrack is filled by the sound of the electric heater attempting to warm up the cold room. The sound of the heater as well as their insistence on holding on to their thick winter clothes conveys the coldness of the room. Against this coldness the briefly exposed pieces of flesh are vulnerable and warm, truly exposed. The lack of dialogue and the minimal soundtrack direct attention to touch; the sense of touching and being touched. The breathing as well as the gasps of air also direct the attention on tactility. Our bodies are guided to make sense of what might be happening in the scene. The various contrasts in materials, temperature and sounds heighten the experiencer's awareness of her own body as a sense making subject.

The passionate encounter renders both bodies tactile through a depiction of an encounter so passionate, so all-consuming that it is hard to assign the body parts to their rightful owners. Extreme close-ups and superimposed images take us to the characters' skin and in to our own memories of touching and being touched. That which is evoked is more than a memory, it is a sensation rooted deeply in the body, further fed by our inability to separate the lovers' bodies we are watching. That which the eyes cannot separate or make meaning of will still, and arguably even more so, be sensed in the body and on the skin. These images are erotic and they are haptic as defined by Marks: 'haptic images can give the impression of seeing for the first time, gradually discovering what is in the image rather than coming to the image already knowing what it is' (Marks 2000: 178).





*Image 23 - Tactility evoked by extreme close-ups that blur the visibility of what is represented.*

The cinematography explores the bodies by closing in on them and the editing either fragments them by cutting between extreme close-ups of different bodies, or 'melts' them into each other by superimposing and fading places and people on and in each other. Neither cinematography nor editing techniques are necessarily used to sexually objectify a character, or to progress the plot by pointing out a gesture or a physical quality, but rather by focusing on unexpected details so that "the fragment becomes a sensory extension, the close-up a focalisation on a particular sensation" (Beugnet 2004: 192). So the extreme close-up is used to evoke a sense of touch, a sense of different materials through these haptic images. Laura U. Marks talks about the difference between pornography and haptic images pointing out how pornography relies on the hypervisuality whereas haptic images draw the film experiencer so close to the image that it becomes blurry, invisible. Marks clarifies:

Rather than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the object into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction. Haptic images pull the viewer close, too close to see properly, and this itself is erotic (Marks 2002: 16).

The limited visibility of the whole of the bodies, the chosen extreme close-ups of *Vendredi Soir*'s main characters are exactly these kinds of haptic images. They pull the

film experiencer so close to the image, the representation of a body, that one's vision gets blurred. This closeness evokes a sense of touching and being touched. The contrast between bare, vulnerable skin momentarily uncovered against the thick, rough winter clothing highlights the difference in textures conveying a sense of this difference in material and temperature, again evoking a sense of touch. The slow and hesitant pace of the two unfamiliar bodies awkwardly fumbling, uncovering and exploring each other allows time for the film experiencer to reflect and engage her own senses, her own memories of touching and being touched.

The 'breathing' of the image - its constant movement on the bodies, closeness from the characters and search for focus - emphasises the strangeness of the bodies, the shyness of taking one's clothes off in front of a total stranger for the first time. As Morrow writes in her review: "Denis films the intimacy very close up: having been in Laure's head for the first part of the film, suddenly we're under her skin" (Morrow, 2003). Denis herself points out that she attempted to use the almost palpable shyness between the actors and the rest of the crew. The fact that the actors and the film crew had not worked together before this, worked for the film's advantage especially in the latter part of the film: "Such shyness is very interesting, especially in this film, because Laure and Jean (Vincent Lindon) don't know each other; it's about discovering the unknown" (Denis in interview with Morrow, 2003).

The way the hands have to find the skin from under the multiple layers of clothing evokes a more intense feeling of touch for the film experiencer. The texture of everything touched is emphasised in the contrasts; the heavy and rough material of a winter coat against a pale skinned flesh, the cold air of the room against the warm human flesh. Their breathing is now heavy and lustful. The heater that is glowing by the wall intensifies the warm colours which in turn evoke a sense of warmth. In-between the two scenes of consummation we are briefly reminded of the world outside their room as Laure wanders off into the corridor in her winter coat and bare feet. She walks into empty rooms, tiptoes around the corridor, listens to the sound of running water. The hotel is full of stories but the possibility of them is only referred to by her brief wandering in the empty floor. As we know they are the only guests in the hotel that night, there is no fear attached to the emptiness of the place. It gives the possibility of



indulging themselves for one night without making any demands on them. It might even disappear in the morning as Laure does from Jean's life.

#### Saturday morning

*Vendredi Soir* takes its time and lingers on details, cherishes the moments of engaging its experiencers' senses and follows the hesitant and erratic pace of desire. This indulgence of senses is replicated in the characters' exploring and savouring of each other during the one night they spend together. Laure keeps smelling Jean. She touches, not only him, but the clothes he wears, the materials his clothes are made out of both inside and out. It is as if she wants to slip under his skin by slipping into his clothes. The layers of clothing and their tactility are highlighted by the superimposed images dissolving into one another. It is as if this technique suggests that such fluidity of touching, dissolving, might be possible between people.

*Vendredi Soir* uses the close-up and the extreme close-up to evoke the sensuous body of its experiencer. This dissecting of the bodies into fragmented images does not, however, objectify them but rather frees them from any possibility of being objectified. What is highlighted in these close-ups is the sense of touching and being touched through the contrasting of different materials, colours and body parts that come into contact with skin. The editing, which makes good use of the tactility of superimposed images, evokes and feeds the experiencers' sense of touch throughout the film. The soundtrack highlights, directs and punctuates the mood of the film and moments of realisation. As a film firmly grounded in the 'tradition' of cinema of sensations, *Vendredi Soir* allows itself, and even makes it its mission, to explore the fluidity, and versatile nature of female desire. It does this by shying away from the conventional use of dialogue as an essential element for telling a story, and instead provides its experiencer with a feast of sensuous and visceral material at a pace that allows time for reflection and encourages an engagement with one's own body as a sense making subject.

## CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with a particular fascination with two films, *Dans Ma Peau* and *Vendredi Soir*, and through the research process I have come to better understand how and why these films are able to move me in particular ways, ways that other films do not. Both films encourage the engagement of all senses through their sparse dialogue, their contemplative tempo, evocative cinematography and editing. Although first seeming so different, they both ground their experiencer in her own body by addressing and exploring the body in various ways. The images in both films are ‘spacious’ allowing and inviting contemplation in a different way than most narrative driven films do, thus allowing more ‘room’ for identification through the subjective world of sensory affects. Rather than ‘telling a story’, *Dans Ma Peau* and *Vendredi Soir* evoke sensations, inviting their experiencers to use the whole of their bodies corporeality and viscosity in making sense of the film experience.

The suggestions discussed in this thesis, are to locate ourselves firmly into our own ‘cinesthetic’ bodies and in our own senses in search of a new way to talk about film. What has been lacking in film analysis is a language to talk about the bodily experiences, as well as an understanding of having to take our corporeal experiences seriously in order to analyse films that ‘touch’ and ‘move’ us. In the cinema even film theorists are sensual, ‘lived bodies’, as in subjective and grounded in their own flesh, and as such, we make sense of the films we ‘watch’ through our bodies and because of our bodies. I have argued that it could be precisely this sort of ‘danger’ in having to make an investment as a sense-making subject that has for so long kept film theorists turning towards discourses of psychoanalysis, for example, and addressing human experience as originally and fundamentally cognitive. But to hold such an assumption would be to reduce the question of perception to a question of mere knowledge (Shaviro, 1993).

As has been shown, some scholars are already reaching beyond the visual into the realm of the visceral in an attempt to do justice to the versatile art form of film. Accurate and sensitive descriptions of our tactile, corporeal experiences of films, the ‘fleshing-out’ of the analysis of films, will allow discussions of tactile responses to representations of touch, sexual or otherwise, in a more subjective but perhaps also in a more fruitful or at

least different way. I have argued that expanding our analysis to take into account corporeal experiences as film experiencers, also challenges us as scholars and academics, to dig deeper into our own corporeality, to expand our borders of familiarity and perhaps re-think what we are basing our responses on. Hence perhaps re-educating ourselves, as well as other experiencers of, film's full potential.

In chapter 1 I introduced some of the theoretical frameworks around film phenomenology as I found it to be the best approach to these films which address the experiencer's corporeal being. In chapter 2 I established a cinematic context for the thesis and in chapter 3 I explored the possibility of writing about my own embodied experience of the films. Through the research process I have come to better understand how and why these two films move me in particular ways; they explore the body by allowing their experience 'space' to move around the images, to contemplate one's own subjective corporeality in relation to their representations. Although *Dans Ma Peau* and *Vendredi Soir* are two very different films on the surface, by allowing time and space for this contemplation, they invite their experiencers to engage with them in a different way than most mainstream films do. They present us with the cinematic version of Artaud's theatre of cruelty by challenging us to contemplate how far we would be willing to go, where our own personal boundaries are. They ask us to engage with matters some of us might not feel comfortable engaging with, hence perhaps leaving their experiencers shook up, disturbed, or perhaps awakened. They continue in Howard Barker's footsteps by not offering easy solutions, not even happy endings, they leave us questioning, just as Barker argued theatre should do.

In the analyses of the films I took a closer look at the ways both films 'get under my skin', how I sense them in my musculature and how they evoke memories of a past time, of, for example, a trained body I used to have. I was, however, left frustrated as I found no satisfactory way of writing about my own embodied responses. It soon became clear to me why Beugnet and Palmer made no attempt to write about their embodied experiences of the films they explored. Sobchack, on the other hand, grounds her analyses 'in the flesh', in *her* flesh, and perhaps I should have followed her example even more closely. Through writing the analyses it also became clearer to me how important it would have been to find a way to record the way I experienced the films

each time I watched them. Writing down notes after watching a film was like collecting memories, and the visceral and muscular responses were lost by the time I came to write them down. I tried talking into a recorder but found my own voice, my intellectualisation - whilst attempting to be present in the moment and truly experience the film - distracted me from the film experience. I even considered filming myself watching the films, but thought the process of watching a film about me watching a film merely complicating things further, and that was not my intention. I am aware of science laboratories where people are wired into machines to get an accurate 'picture' of the corporeal responses, but even that would not record the evoked memories, which have an essential part in shaping my response to the films in the first place.

There are film theorists who are interested in the visceral connection between films and their experiencers and no doubt their future contributions will take the discussion further into the possibilities of films being 'watched', experienced by and through our whole bodies. I am sure that Vivien Sobchack, Jennifer Barker and Tim Palmer (to mention a few) are taking this discussion further 'as I type'. I would be interested in exploring how the experiencer's body could be used as a tool of analysis, or could it? I would also still be interested, as I was in the very beginning of this research, to find a way, not only to be able to note down the viscosity of my responses, but also to explore how (female) desire is represented on screen. How 'the mysterious' and versatile subject of desire takes form in representations.

Throughout this research process I have been frustrated by my inability to articulate my corporeal findings, experiences and budding analysis in writing. I have blamed my inadequate skills in English language, I have continuously doubted my skills as a writer and more than anything, I have doubted my ability to theorise about film. What I have, however, found out through my attempts in analysing, recalling, noting down, remembering, expressing is, that what I am referring to are my memories of an experience long gone. An experience so coloured with emotions and personal history, affected by not only the place and form in which I viewed the film, but what mood I was in, whether it was thunder and lightning or sunshine outside, whether I was wearing comfortable clothes or had squeezed into the new shoes that had ripped my toes in to a bloody mess - that more than the film, I was analysing myself *with* the film. *Through* the

film I saw the way I had changed, the way I had grown or not as the case may be. I found myself being very sentimental and emotional in more occasions than one. I missed the trained body I had twenty years before writing this. I even shed a few tears for all the lost opportunities due to the choices I had made. In short, I found it impossible to make notes and experience a film at the same time. One may watch a 'video', by that I mean a film which one consumes on a Sunday afternoon for pleasure and make notes on by stopping and starting it again. But to experience, truly experience film as a form of art for all senses, one has to be present in experiencing it, and if one is taking notes, to my experience, that is not possible.

So at the moment, I think I am done with attempting analyses. I think I am done with theorising about film. I think it is about time I put my heart where my mouth is and, as a scriptwriter, write a film I would love to experience. When I am watching my film, or if you would happen to see it somewhere, some day, please, do *not* make any notes, be brave and be present, experience my film to the full, with all your senses, that way it just might have a chance of touching You.

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